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European Research Council (ERC)
Frontier Research Grants

Guide for Peer Reviewers
Advanced Grant Call

European Research Council
Executive Agency

Established by the European Commission

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Applicable to the ERC Advanced Grant Call
(ERC Work Programme 2024)

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IMPORTANT TO NOTE

This Guide for Peer Reviewers is based on the legal documents setting the rules and conditions for the ERC frontier research grants, in particular:

- the ERC Work Programme 2024[1], which defines the objectives and principles of the ERC funding as well as the main features of the Calls for Proposals for the ERC Advanced Grants including the call deadline and the call budget. It also specifies that a two-step peer review procedure will be applied following a single submission of a full proposal, and sets the framework for budgetary implementation and the evaluation criteria;
- the ERC Rules of submission and evaluation under Horizon Europe, which establish the rules applying to the submission of proposals and the related evaluation process, selection and award procedures relevant to the Specific Programme of Horizon Europe – the Framework programme for Research and Innovation (2021-2027);
- the Contract[2] or the Letter of Appointment[3] for ERC experts and ERC Remote Referees respectively, which define the relationship between the ERC Executive Agency (ERCEA) and the experts, and the use of personal data by the ERCEA[4].

This document complements and does not supersede the aforementioned documents, which are legally binding and prevail in case of any discrepancies. This guide specifies in more details the peer review evaluation process, its inputs and outputs, and the responsibilities of the participating reviewers in the process.

The European Commission, the ERC Executive Agency or any person or body acting on their behalf cannot be held responsible for the use made of this document.

Abbreviations

AC - Associated Country

ADG - Advanced Grant

ERC - European Research Council

ERC WP - ERC Work Programme

F&T portal – EU Funding & Tenders Portal

HI - Host Institution

PEV - Panel Evaluator

PI - Principal Investigator

PM - Panel Member

RR - Remote Referee

ScC - ERC Scientific Council

SEP - Submission and Evaluation of Proposals System

[1] European Commission C(2023)3999 of 10 July 2023.

[2] It is published on the F&T Portal: https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/experts/model-contract_en.pdf.

[3] See Annex B to the ERC Rules of submission and evaluation under Horizon Europe.

[4] The personal data are processed in accordance with Regulation (EU) No 2018/1725.

CONTENTS

1. EVALUATION OF ERC ADVANCED GRANT PROPOSALS

The ERC has the mandate to implement a bottom-up, investigator-driven approach to frontier research funding. The selection of proposals for funding by the ERCEA is a result of a panel-based, peer review evaluation with excellence as the sole criterion. The principal objective of this peer review system is to select the best science, independent of its discipline and of the particularities of the review panel structure.

The purpose of the ERC Advanced Grant scheme is to empower individual researchers who are established research leaders with a recognised track record of research achievements and to provide the best setting to foster their creativity. This grant scheme supports projects carried out by individual teams, which are headed by a single Principal Investigator.

Principal Investigators must demonstrate the ground-breaking nature, ambition and feasibility of their scientific proposal. The PIs of an ERC research proposal are expected to take risks. It remains important, however, that the risk and how it will be managed be well thought through and addressed in the proposal.

1.1 PEER REVIEWERS

In the ERC panel-based system, high-level scientists and scholars assess proposals and make recommendations for funding with the assistance of external specialists called Remote Referees. The evaluations are guided by the Expert Code of Conduct. Furthermore, the relationship between the ERCEA and the peer reviewers is defined by a signed expert contract for Panel Members, Panel Chairs and Panel Evaluators (PEVs) and a letter of appointment for Remote Referees (see respectively the Model Contract for Experts and the Letter of Appointment for ERC Remote Referees).

By signing these documents, the expert accepts the conditions regarding confidentiality and conflict of interest, and use of personal data by the ERCEA. The ERCEA cannot make proposals available to an expert who has not been officially contracted.

A breach of the Expert Code of Conduct or other serious misconduct by a reviewer may be qualified as grave professional misconduct and may lead to the termination of the contract or the agreement based on the letter of appointment.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST AND CONFIDENTIALITY RULES FOR PEER REVIEWERS

Peer reviewers should not be put in a situation in which their impartiality may be questioned, or where suspicion could arise that recommendations are affected by elements that lie outside the scope of the review. To that effect, a clear set of conflict of interest rules are in place.[5] Furthermore, peer reviewers should not engage in any contact with applicants and Host Institutions about the evaluation, in which they are participating (neither during nor after the evaluation is over). Confidentiality is a contractual obligation, and its breach can lead to the termination of the Contract or the Letter of Appointment. The conflict of interest rules for reviewers are outlined in their Expert Contract and Letter of Appointment respectively.

[5] The actions that the ERCEA might put in place in order to ensure the strict impartiality of evaluations are either to exclude the expert from participating in the peer review evaluation of the proposal concerned ('out of room' conflict of interest) or, if necessary, of all competing proposals ('out of call' conflict of interest), in accordance with the Expert Code of Conduct annexed to both the Expert Contract and the Letter of Appointment.

A list of conflicts of interest (see below) will be displayed in the on-line evaluation system, and the experts will be asked to confirm absence of conflict of interest when accepting to review and when submitting their individual review. Based on the information available, the Panel Chair shall avoid assigning proposals to reviewers who have a conflict of interest. Please note that it is the responsibility of the expert to declare the conflict of interest.

List of conflicts of interest displayed in the on-line evaluation system[6]:

- I am PI or team member in the proposal (or any other proposal submitted to the same call).
- I was involved in the preparation of the proposal (or any other proposal submitted to the same panel).
- I would benefit directly should the proposal (or any other proposal submitted to the same panel) be accepted or rejected.
- I am employed or contracted by the host or partner institutions of the proposal - or have been so in the past 3 years.
- I am involved in the management of the host or partner institutions of the proposal - or have been so in the past 3 years.
- I am collaborating scientifically or have done so in the past 5 years - with the PI.
- I have (or have had) a mentor/mentee relationship with the PI.
- I have family ties or close personal relationship with the PI (or any PI submitting a proposal to the same panel).
- I have family ties or close personal relationship with anyone who was involved in the preparation of the proposal (or any other proposal submitted to the same panel).
- I have family ties or close personal relationship with anyone who would benefit directly from the proposal being granted (or from any other proposal submitted to the same panel being granted) or rejected.
- I am (or was) in a relationship of scientific rivalry or hostility with the PI.
- I am a National Contact Point or working for the Enterprise Europe Network (EEN).
- I am a member of an EU programme committee.
- I am in any other situation that would preclude the impartial review of the proposal or that could appear to do so.

ROLES OF THE ERC PEER REVIEWERS

ERC Panels

An ERC panel consists of a Panel Chair and between 11 and 17 Panel Members. In exceptional and duly justified situations, the size of the panels can be increased, for example in order to better balance the workload in areas with many submitted proposals and/or to appropriately cover all areas of research in a panel. The Panel Chair and the Panel Members are selected by the ERC Scientific Council (ScC) on the basis of their scientific reputation and following the criteria set up by the ERC ScC Standing Committee on Panels. They have specialist as well as generalist competence and should not act as representatives of a single discipline or of a particular line of research. ERC panels are expected to work as entities, reflecting broad visions embracing emerging fields, inter- and multi-disciplinary research.

Panel Chairs and Panel Members make a significant commitment of their time to the ERC peer review evaluation process, working individually and as a group. Each panel meets twice to carry out

[6] Please note that the above-mentioned briefly outlined examples of the conflict of interest situations are fully described in the Expert Contract and the Letter of Appointment, including the actions that the ERCEA might put in place in order to ensure the strict impartiality of evaluations.

a two-step review of proposals. The panel as a whole takes decisions on the proposals recommended for funding and it is therefore crucial for the quality of the evaluation process that Panel Members are fully available for both panel meetings.[7] It is expected that Panel Members attend the evaluation sessions that are held on-site in person.

Panel Chairs and Panel Members perform the following tasks:

1. Familiarisation[8] with proposals of their panel in preparation for the panel meetings.
2. Individual remote review - by electronic means - of a subset of those proposals in preparation for the panel meetings.
3. Participation in the panel meetings.

ERC Panel Chairs and Panel Members are expected to contribute to the evaluation process by delivering concise and substantial reviews on the basis of their specialist expertise as well as their generalist competence, which should reflect openness to inter- and multi-disciplinary research perspectives, and by actively participating in the panel meetings. Panel Chairs and Panel Members are also expected to review upon request proposals submitted to other panels if their expertise is sought. The panels may decide to assign each proposal to a Panel Member having the special role of '**Lead Reviewer**'. During the panel meetings, the Lead Reviewer is in charge of introducing the proposal based on the submitted reviews[9] to the panel for discussion and is responsible for drafting the panel comment at the end of the meeting.

Panel Chairs have additional tasks and responsibilities, while working in close collaboration with the ERCEA Scientific Officers of the concerned panel:

1. To chair the panel meetings.
2. To attend the Initial Panels Meeting in order to assess the response to the call for proposals and plan the work of the Panel accordingly.
3. To (re)allocate proposals to panels. Although the initial allocation is based on the expressed preference of the applicant, when necessary, owing to the expertise required for their evaluation, proposals may be reallocated to different panels at the beginning of the evaluation. This reallocation should be done with the agreement of the two Panel Chairs concerned in the interest of the applicant, to ensure a competent and fair evaluation of the proposal.
4. To assign proposals to Panel Members (and to Remote Referees) for individual reviewing. Panel Chairs will pay particular attention to the rules on conflict of interest and exclusion of experts.
5. To ensure that the Panels produce all necessary deliverables at the required quality standards by the end of the panel meetings, including the ranked lists and feedback to applicants.
6. To select experts for remote evaluation.[10]
7. To attend the Final Panel Chairs' meeting.

If a Panel Chair is unable to attend the Initial Panels Meeting, this task can be delegated to the Deputy Panel Chair.[11]

[7] Panel meetings may take place in the ERCEA premises in Brussels or remotely, using teleconferencing IT tools.

[8] Reading and assimilating briefing documents (including webcast briefings).

[9] In cases when lead reviewers identify inappropriate comments (e.g., factual errors, offensive statements, swapped reviews), they should inform the Panel Chair and the ERCEA Scientific Officer.

[10] The ERC Scientific Council mandates the Panel Chairs. See footnote 34 of the ERC Rules of submission and evaluation under Horizon Europe. The Panel Chair signs the list of experts nominated for remote evaluation. The approval by the Panel Chair is required before any remote expert is contacted and appointed.

[11] At the beginning of the evaluation process, Panel Chairs appoint a Deputy Panel Chair among the Panel Members.

The names of the Panel Chairs are publicly available before the submission deadline of the call. The names of the Panel Members are published on the ERC website after the evaluation process is concluded and the final results have been communicated to all applicants.

Panel Evaluators (PEVs) are Panel Members of other ERC calls and/or panels and can be involved in both Steps of the evaluation process. Panel Evaluators help the Panel Members at the Step 1 remote evaluation, if their expertise is needed or in case of a large number of submitted proposals. When involved in the Step 2 remote evaluation, they have been selected by the panel due to their close expertise to the proposal, hence they act as specialists similarly to the Remote Referees. Panel Evaluators do not participate in panel meetings. Their remote reviewing work is remunerated.

Remote Referees

In addition to the Panel Members (who act as generalists) and PEVs, the ERC evaluations rely on input from Remote Referees (usually two to five per proposal). They are scientists and scholars who bring in the necessary specialised expertise. Remote Referees are non-paid experts who deliver their individual assessments by electronic means and do not participate in the panel meeting. Their involvement is limited to the Step 2 of the evaluation process. Due to the specialised nature of the work, the demands on the time of individual Remote Referees are comparatively smaller (typically, they are asked to evaluate one to three proposals). The names of all Remote Referees are made public once a year for all ERC calls, after the final results have been communicated to all the applicants.

The assignment of Remote Referees to proposals is carried out under the responsibility of the Panel Chair in collaboration with the Panel Members and with the support of the ERCEA Scientific Officers. Any researcher of the international scientific community can act as a Remote Referee, subject to the approval and accreditation of the person in question and their acceptance of the conditions regarding confidentiality and conflict of interest.

All the reviews will then form the basis for the panel discussions.

Exclusion of independent experts at the request of an applicant[12]

Applicants submitting proposals may request that up to three specific persons would not act as peer reviewers in the evaluation of their proposal. Such a request is made in the administrative forms at the time of proposal submission. If the persons identified for exclusion are independent experts participating in the evaluation, they may be excluded from the evaluation of the proposal as long as it remains possible to have the proposal evaluated. Such a request will be treated confidentially by the authorised staff of the ERCEA and the concerned Panel Chair. If the excluded expert is a member of the panel, they will be informed in confidence about the request concerning them. In the case of exclusion of the Panel Chair, the authorised staff of the ERCEA may consult the Deputy Panel Chair accordingly.

PANEL MEETING OBSERVERS

ERC Scientific Council may delegate its members to attend panel meetings. The role of these delegates is to monitor the evaluation process and ensure and promote coherence between panels.[13]

[12] See section 3.3 of the ERC Rules of submission and evaluation under Horizon Europe.

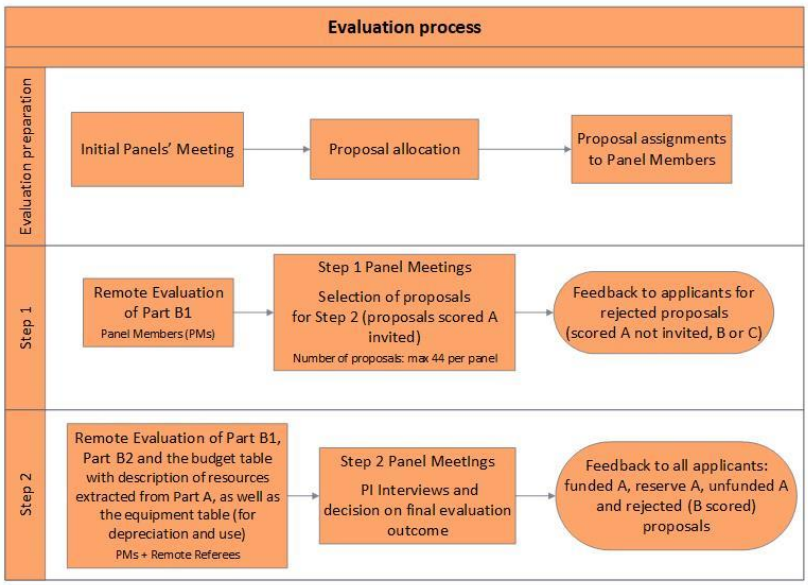
[13] https://erc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document/file/Rules_Procedure_and_Code_Conduct_ERC_Scientific_Council.pdf

In conformity with the mandate of the ERC Scientific Council to carry out the scientific governance of the ERC, and in line with the role of the ERC Scientific Council foreseen in the ERC WP, ERC Scientific Council Members will abstain from influencing the results of the peer review evaluation process.

Independent observers

Independent external experts may be appointed as observers to examine the peer review evaluation process from the point of view of its working and execution. The independent observers are external to the ERCEA and to the ERC Scientific Council. Their function and role is described in section 3.4 of the ERC Rules of submission and evaluation under Horizon Europe.

1.2 EVALUATION PROCESS



ADMISSIBILITY AND ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA OF ERC PROPOSALS

The assessment of admissibility and eligibility[14] of submitted proposals is carried out by the ERCEA. Nevertheless, if an expert considers a proposal to be potentially inadmissible or ineligible during the evaluation process, they should report the case immediately to the ERCEA Scientific Officers. In some rare cases, proposals may be declared inadmissible or ineligible during or even after the peer review evaluation process, as their non-compliance to admissibility and eligibility criteria can only be confirmed with some delay.

INITIAL PANEL MEMBERS' MEETING AND BRIEFINGS OF EXPERTS

Soon after the Call deadline and at the start of the proposals' evaluation process, Panel Members are invited to the **Initial Panel Members' meeting**, where they are briefed on all relevant aspects of the

[14] For admissibility and eligibility criteria see p. 23 of ERC Work Programme 2024.

evaluation processes and procedures. ERCEA Scientific Officers support Panel Chairs in assigning the proposals to Panel Members and Panel Evaluators. At the start of each panel meeting, Panel Chairs and Panel Members are briefed by their ERCEA Scientific Officers on different aspects related to the evaluation rules and procedure.[15]

A TWO-STEP EVALUATION

The Advanced Grant call foresees a single submission of full proposals followed by a two-step evaluation, including interviews with the applicants.

At both evaluation Steps, two main elements of the proposal are evaluated: the **Research Project** and the **Principal Investigator**. The panels will primarily evaluate the ground-breaking nature, ambition, and feasibility of the research project. At the same time, the panels will evaluate the intellectual capacity, creativity, and commitment of the Principal Investigator, with a focus on the extent to which the Principal Investigator has the required scientific expertise and capacity to successfully execute the project. Each evaluation Step includes a remote evaluation phase where individual reviewers work independently (see Section 2. Individual Review) and deliver the reviews for each proposal assigned to them. The remote evaluation phase is performed through an online evaluation system, SEP Evaluation (see Section 3. Electronic tools used in evaluation).

After the remote phase, the panel meetings are organised. During these meetings, all the proposals assigned to the panel are discussed, scored, and ranked. Each proposal is assigned to a Lead Reviewer, who introduces the proposal to the panel for discussion and is responsible for drafting the panel comment. The panel assesses, scores, and ranks the proposals on the basis of the individual reviews received and on the basis of the panel discussion. At Step 2, the assessment by the panel will also take into account the interview with the applicant.

The deliverables of any panel meeting include the following documents:

1. Ranked list of proposals
2. Panel comments approved by the panel (see paragraph below)
3. List of approved Remote Referees (only at Step 1)
4. Panel report
5. Panel Recommendations (feedback and suggestions from the panel to the ERC Scientific Council – at Step 2)

The panel comment is the key element of the information provided to the applicants at the end of the evaluation. Once the scores and the ranked list of the proposals are decided, Lead Reviewers draft panel comments reflecting the main points of the panel discussion, and the panel agrees on their final version in a plenary. The panel comment details the decision taken by the panel based on the individual reviews, the panel discussion on the proposal and, at Step 2, the interview with the applicant. The panel comment should clearly explain the reason(s) that made the proposal succeed or fail in the evaluation, in line with the ERC evaluation criterion. Panel Members should also ensure that scientific recommendations made to applicants (which may or may not be taken into account) are clearly distinct from their budget recommendations to the ERCEA (which are binding).

At each Step, a number of proposals of reasonable or good quality will be rejected. Such proposals may typically have positive comments from individual reviewers. However, following the discussion at the meeting, they do not gather enough support from the panel when taking into account the

[15] See section 3.6.1 (1) – 'Briefings of the panels' in the ERC Rules of submission and evaluation under Horizon Europe.

maximum of 44 proposals that can be passed to Step 2 or the maximum number of proposals that can be funded at Step 2. In such cases, the panel comment may reflect this aspect.

In some cases, the panel may take a position that is different from what could be inferred from the comments of the individual reviewers. For example, if the panel discussion reveals an important weakness in a proposal, the panel comment should document its reasons. The panel comment is a conclusive comment agreed upon by the panel and approved by the Panel Chair and should clearly explain the decision adopted by the panel.

Besides the final rank list, the crucial output of the panel meetings is the feedback to applicants.[16] The **Evaluation Report** of each evaluated proposal contains:

1. the recommendation of the panel and the ranking range;
2. the panel comment;
3. the individual reviews for this proposal (see Section 2).

STEP 1 Remote phase and panel meeting

At Step 1, Panel Members acting as generalists review remotely **Part B1 only** (the extended synopsis together with the PI's track record and CV).[17] Panel Members write individual reviews for each proposal they have been assigned. These reviews are part of the evaluation report sent to the applicants with *A not invited, B* or *C* scores.[18]

Concurrently, the reviewers are asked to suggest additional scientists/scholars (Remote Referees) who could assess the proposals, if passed to Step 2, as specialists. They are selected on the basis of their expertise for the specific proposal; any researcher from anywhere in the world can be nominated. The Panel Chairs are mandated by the Scientific Council to select independent external experts for remote evaluation on the basis of the specific expertise required by each proposal.[19]

After the remote evaluation phase, the Panel Members take part in the Step 1 meeting to discuss all proposals assigned to the panel and to establish the panel ranking. The proposals are ranked by the panel on the basis of the individual comments and the panel's overall appreciation of their strengths and weaknesses. Each proposal receives one of the following panel scores:

Score A – the proposal is of excellent quality and ranked sufficiently high to pass to Step 2 of the evaluation;
Score A not invited – the proposal is of excellent quality but not ranked sufficiently high[20] to pass to Step 2 of the evaluation;
Score B – the proposal is of **high quality but not sufficient** to pass to Step 2 of the evaluation;
Score C – the proposal is **not of sufficient quality** to pass to Step 2 of the evaluation.

[16] The feedback is sent to the applicants of the proposals scored *A not invited*, *B* or *C* at Step 1, and proposals scored *A* or *B* at Step 2

[17] If necessary, they can be assisted by Panel Evaluators - PEVs.

[18] These individual reviews 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 ERCEA will not change the content of the reviews that form part of the evaluation report, except if necessary to improve readability or, exceptionally, to remove clerical errors or inappropriate comments, provided such errors or comments do not affect the evaluation results.

[19] See footnote 34 of the ERC rules of submission and evaluation under Horizon Europe.

[20] I.e., it exceeds the maximum threshold of 44 proposals that can be passed to Step 2. A not invited score can be given to a proposal only when 44 proposals were passed to Step 2 in the respective panel.

Applicants whose proposals receive a **B** or **C** score in **Step 1** of the evaluation may be subject to resubmission restrictions in future calls if specified in the applicable ERC Work Programme.[21]

Based on the Step 1 evaluation outcome, proposals scored *A invited* (maximum 44 proposals per panel) are retained for Step 2.

At the end of the Step 1 panel meeting, the Panel Chair examines all proposals passed to Step 2 (***A invited*** score) and decides on the assignment of proposals to experts. ERCEA contacts the remote reviewers selected by the panel and approved by the Panel Chair for a more in-depth review during the Step 2 remote evaluation.

Applicants who receive an ***A invited*** score are invited for an interview to present their proposal at the Step 2 panel meeting. Each panel decides on the exact format of its interviews (duration; number of slides allowed, if any; time allocated to the presentation and to the questions and answers session).

For each rejected proposal (***A not invited***, **B** or **C** scored), a panel comment explaining the panel decision is written. The panel comment summarises the discussion on the proposal among Panel Members at the Step 1 meeting.

Applicants whose proposal has been rejected at Step 1 receive an information letter, together with an Evaluation Report including the final panel score, the ranking range of their proposal among the proposals evaluated by the panel, the panel comment and the individual reviews given by each reviewer.

Applicants whose proposals are retained for the Step 2 evaluation do not receive a Step 1 Evaluation Report.

STEP 2 Remote phase and panel meeting

At Step 2, Panel Members and Remote Referees remotely and individually review the complete version of the retained proposals - **Parts B1 and B2,** the **resources** section (including the budget table) and the **time commitment** extracted from Part A as well as the equipment table (for depreciation and use) **-** providing generalist and specialist reviews respectively. After this remote evaluation phase, the panel meets for the Step 2 panel meeting, when interviews with the applicants take place. 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:

- **Score A–** the proposal fully meets the ERC's excellence criterion and **is recommended for funding, if sufficient funds are available;**[22]
- **Score B–** the proposal meets some but not all elements of the ERC's excellence criterion and is **not recommended for funding.**

[21] See Restrictions on submission of proposals under "Admissibility and eligibility criteria" of the ERC WP 2024.
[22] Additional funds can become available in cases such as the failure of the granting procedure to projects, the withdrawal of proposals, budget savings agreed during the granting procedure, or the availability of additional budget from other sources.

Review of the proposal budget

At Step 2, the panel analyses the budget, its justification and the requested contribution of the proposals, which are being considered for funding. Recommendations for reduction of the requested grant may be made if some resources are not considered fully justified or needed (the analysis is done case-by-case, cuts across-the-board are not allowed), or related costs are deemed excessive. Such recommendations must be documented and explained in the panel comment for each proposal concerned, based on an analysis of the resources requested and necessary to carry out the work.

After the Step 2 meetings have finished for all panels, the results from the different panels are consolidated into one call ranking list based on the 'normalised accumulated budget'.[23] The highest ranked **A scored** proposals are invited for grant preparation until the entire call budget is spent. The remaining proposals recommended for funding may be funded by the ERC if more funds become available.

RANKING METHODOLOGY

Ranking of the proposals is the outcome of a thorough discussion in the panel, excluding those Panel Members who have a conflict of interest.

THE POSSIBLE USE OF A VOTING SYSTEM

While consensus decisions are strongly preferred, panels may finalise 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)[24]. A Panel Chair/Member can neither be involved in a discussion nor vote for a proposal if under a conflict of interest.

All applicants whose proposals have been evaluated at Step 2 receive an information letter, together with an Evaluation Report including the ranking range of their proposal among the proposals evaluated by the Panel, the panel score, the panel comment, and the individual reviews given by each reviewer.

2. INDIVIDUAL REVIEW

2.1 EVALUATION CRITERION

Scientific excellence is the sole criterion of evaluation and is at the core of the peer review evaluation process. It is applied to the evaluation of both the ground-breaking nature, ambition and feasibility of the Research Project, and the intellectual capacity, creativity and commitment of the

[23] The recommended normalized accumulated budget (NAB) for every panel is calculated by summing the normalized budget (recommended budget divided by panel's indicative budget) of each proposal from the top position down to the actual position of the given proposal. Thus, the NAB takes into account the position of the proposal in its panel ranking, the recommended budget of the proposal and of all proposals ranked higher in the same panel and the indicative budget of the panel.

[24] There is also the possibility to use a cumulative ranking system where Panel Members contribute their individual preferred ranking of a subset of proposals under discussion. All rankings submitted by Panel Members are added up and divided by the number of Panel Members resulting in a cumulative ranking which reflects the view of the entire panel.

Principal Investigator, with a focus on the extent to which the Principal Investigator has the required scientific expertise and capacity to successfully execute the project.

The feasibility of the scientific approach is assessed at Step 1. The detailed scientific approach (methodology, timescales, and resources included) is assessed at Step 2. The detailed elements applying to the excellence of the Research Project and the Principal Investigator for each Step and their interpretation are described in the applicable ERC Work Programme. In evaluating the applicant's track-record, preprints properly referenced and with the DOI or linked to a preprint, may also be taken into consideration.

Only the evaluation criterion of excellence, as per the elements defined in the ERC Work Programme, must be considered when evaluating a proposal. The evaluation questions are listed in Annex 1.

Please note that the incorrect application of the evaluation criterion or the application of inexistent or irrelevant criteria for the Step concerned is considered a procedural error, which may justify a re-evaluation of the proposal.

2.2 HOW TO EVALUATE A PROPOSAL – DOs AND DON'Ts

Individual reviews are written prior to Step 1 and Step 2 panel meetings. The ERC Rules of submission and evaluation under Horizon Europe require that each proposal shall be reviewed by at least three peer reviewers.

During the individual remote review evaluation, **reviewers evaluate and mark** the proposals according to (1) Research Project and (2) Principal Investigator as follows:

- Providing a succinct explanatory comment for the Research Project.
- Indicating to which extent the reviewer agrees with the statements related to the excellence of the Principal Investigator (multiple choice format) and providing an explanatory comment for the Principal Investigator. The available options related to the statements on the Principal Investigator are the following: Outstanding/Excellent/Very Good/Good/Non-competitive.
- Award an overall mark for the Research Project and an overall qualitative assessment (multiple choice format) for *the Principal Investigator with the following five options: Outstanding/ Excellent/Very Good/Good/Non-competitive* Please note that **Remote Referees award a qualitative three-option funding recommendation** on the proposal: *highly recommended, recommended,* or *not recommended*.

Individual reviews have to be submitted no later than the deadlines set by ERCEA.

Proposal mark and PI overall qualitative assessment

The proposal's numerical **mark and overall qualitative assessment of the PI should be consistent with the comments**. Proposal marks are awarded in integers or halves.[25] The use of the full range of marks is, in general, recommended. The proposal marks and overall qualitative assessment of the PI are not communicated to the applicants; only the final panel score expressed as A invited, A not invited, B or C is provided in the Evaluation Report.

[25] Marks are ranging from 5 (Outstanding), 4 (Excellent), 3 (Very Good), 2 (Good) to 1 (Non-competitive).

Quality standards of individual reviewers' comments

All the individual reviewers' comments are included in the Evaluation Report and as such reproduced in the feedback to applicants. Reviewers should therefore take care about the formulation of comments in their individual assessments.

The individual reviews should be of good quality, genuine, succinct but substantial. They should also be impeccably polite. Comments should take the form of a statement and explanation of key strengths and weaknesses of the proposal, in light of the evaluation criterion.

Reviewers are obliged to observe the following guidelines:

- Provide substantial, explanatory comments; avoid comments that merely give a description or a summary of the proposal.
- Use dispassionate, analytical, and unambiguous language.
- Use grammatically correct, complete, clear sentences with no jargon.
- Ensure that critical comments are constructive.
- Make sure that comments are in line with the marks/funding recommendation given and avoid referring to them in the comment's narrative.
- Avoid self-declaration of insufficient expertise (personal or panel) in the proposal.
- Avoid reference to the applicant's age, nationality, gender, religion, or personal matters.
- Be aware of unconscious bias in aspects such as gender and diversity more broadly. [26]
- Avoid dismissive statements about the Principal Investigator, the proposed science, or the scientific field concerned.
- Take into account the phase of the Principal Investigator's transition to independence, diverse research career paths and particularly noteworthy contributions to the research community, as well as possible breaks in the research career of the applicant and the effects of major life events or pandemic restrictions on the applicant's progression as a researcher.
- Avoid any comments on the Principal Investigator's past, current or future Host Institution; since its standing is not an ERC evaluation criterion.
- Note that the funding ID serves a double purpose: (i) to help reviewers to assess the novelty of the proposed research; (ii) to allow the ERCEA to assess potential overlap during the grant preparation. The funding ID should therefore include only current grants or pending applications. The funding ID is not intended to be a complete funding record.
- Note that societal impact is not an ERC evaluation criterion.
- Avoid any direct comparison with any other proposals.
- Avoid any reference or comparison with previous assessments (in case of a resubmitted proposal).
- Avoid copy-paste from the proposal and/or from individual reviews of other experts.
- Avoid recommendations on budget at Step 1, assessment of budget is done at Step 2.
- Provide proper justification in case a budget cut is recommended (see assessment of the proposal's budget at Step 2).
- When assessing the research achievements of the applicants, focus on the scientific content and refrain from using surrogate measures of the quality of research outputs, such as Journal Impact Factors. Throughout the evaluation the qualitative judgement of the panels should be paramount and quantitative indicators should be used responsibly. Please note that the ERC Scientific Council has endorsed the DORA declaration and signed the Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment;
- Avoid comments on the ethical and security aspects of the proposal. Ethical and security clearance is performed after the scientific evaluation by the ERCEA and respective EU

[26] It has been shown that unconscious bias applies equally, regardless of whether the evaluators are male or female. Whereas possible gender biases may be rooted in the institutions or the community where the applicants may come from, a wealth of evidence points at possible introduction of unconscious biases in evaluation processes (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g978T58gELo). Experts are requested to be vigilant and aware so that such elements are not introduced in the evaluation process.

institutions for all fundable proposals.

Resources assessment guidelines:

- Avoid recommendations on resources at Step 1 evaluation (assessment of resources is done at Step 2 evaluation).
- Provide proper justification in case a budget cut is recommended (see assessment of proposal's budget at Step 2 evaluation).

The efficiency of meetings and preparation

The ERCEA aims to have highly efficient panel meetings. For this reason, preparatory work is carried out in advance of each meeting by electronic means:

- Panel Members assess a subset of proposals evaluated in the panel;
- Panel Members familiarise themselves with all proposals in the panel in order to make high quality recommendations;
- Before the Step 2 meeting, Panel Members prepare for the interviews by identifying the proposals' strengths, weaknesses and concerns raised in the individual reviews delivered prior to the Step 2 meeting.

Expected Reviewers' confidentiality

During the individual remote review process, there shall be no discussions of the proposals between reviewers. Moreover, during the remote evaluation of proposals (i.e., before panel meetings), Panel Members should not disclose the proposals assigned for their evaluation to other experts. When a Panel Member considers that they have insufficient expertise to evaluate any of the assigned proposals from a generalist perspective, they should immediately inform the ERCEA Scientific Officers and the Panel Chair, so that the proposal can be reassigned to another reviewer.

2.3 APPROACH TO MULTI- AND INTER-DISCIPLINARY PROPOSALS

Research proposals of a multi- and interdisciplinary nature are strongly encouraged throughout the ERC's research grants. Proposals of this type are evaluated by the ERC's primary panels, which are per se multidisciplinary, with the appropriate external expertise where necessary.

The initial choice indicated by the applicant when submitting their proposal is paramount in determining the panel under which a proposal is evaluated. The broad definition of the panels allows many interdisciplinary proposals to be treated within a single panel (mainstreaming of interdisciplinarity). During the evaluation process, potentially interdisciplinary proposals are flagged as such, and the panel may request additional reviews from appropriate members of other panel(s). An applicant who considers their proposal as interdisciplinary (i.e., cross-panel or cross-domain) can also explicitly indicate a second panel in the application form. The responsibility to ensure that cross-panel/cross-domain proposals receive equal and fair treatment primarily rests with the panels to which they are allocated.

3. ELECTRONIC TOOLS USED IN EVALUATION

At both Step 1 and Step 2 remote evaluation, experts work individually using the on-line Commission's Evaluation tool (SEP).

Useful information on SEP can be found under the links below:

Quick Guide on SEP Evaluation tool can be found here:

https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/common/it-manuals/user-manual_sep-expert-evaluation_en.pdf

Information on EU Login is available here:
EU Login -https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/funding-tenders-opportunities/display/IT/IT+How+to IT How To - Funding Tenders Opportunities (europa.eu)

ANNEX 1 – EVALUATION FORM

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 ground-breaking 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 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?

ANNEX 2 – PANELS: ALLOCATIONS, INDICATIVE BUDGET AND STRUCTURE

ALLOCATION OF PROPOSALS TO PANELS

The applicant submits the proposal to the panel, which is most relevant for the evaluation of the proposed research ('primary review panel'). If the applicant considers the proposal cross-panel/cross-domain, they may indicate a second relevant panel ('secondary review panel'). In this case, the cross-panel or cross-domain nature of the proposal has to be explained and justified in Part B1. The applicant selects up to four ERC keywords according to the ERC Panel Structure to best describe the field(s) of research covered by their proposal.

The initial allocation of proposals to panels is based on the expressed preference of the applicant. However, proposals may be reallocated to a different panel with the agreement of both Panel Chairs concerned. This is done when necessary and solely due to the expertise required for the evaluation. Such decisions are finalized at the Initial Panel Chairs' meeting.

Proposals that fulfil the admissibility and eligibility criteria are evaluated by the panel to which they have been allocated. The Panel Chairs assign proposals to reviewers.

If the proposal is well within the panel's scope and no additional expertise is necessary, at Step 1 it will be assigned for review only within the panel. However, if the panel considers that the proposal is cross-panel or cross-domain and additional expertise is necessary for its evaluation, it may request additional reviews by appropriate members of other panel(s).

PANEL'S INDICATIVE BUDGET

The ERC WP establishes that the call budget is divided among the panels in proportion to the budgetary demand of the proposals allocated to each panel. This important principle ensures comparable success rates across the individual panels regardless of how many proposals each panel evaluates.

ERC PANELS

Physical Sciences & Engineering

PE1 **Mathematics -** all areas of mathematics, pure and applied, plus mathematical foundations of computer science, mathematical physics, and statistics

PE2 **Fundamental Constituents of Matter -** particle, nuclear, plasma, atomic, molecular, gas, and optical physics

PE3 **Condensed Matter Physics -** structure, electronic properties, fluids, nanosciences, biological physics

PE4 **Physical and Analytical Chemical Sciences -** analytical chemistry, chemical theory, physical chemistry/chemical physics

PE5 **Synthetic Chemistry and Materials -** new materials and new synthetic approaches, structure-properties relations, solid state chemistry, molecular architecture, organic chemistry

PE6 **Computer Science and Informatics -** informatics and information systems, computer science, scientific computing, intelligent systems

PE7 **Systems and Communication Engineering -** electrical, electronic, communication, optical and systems engineering

PE8 **Products and Processes Engineering -** product and process design, chemical, civil, environmental, mechanical, vehicle engineering, energy processes and relevant computational methods

PE9 **Universe Sciences -** astro-physics/-chemistry/-biology; solar system; planetary systems; stellar, galactic, and extragalactic astronomy; cosmology; space sciences; astronomical instrumentation and data

PE10 **Earth System Science -** physical geography, geology, geophysics, atmospheric sciences, oceanography, climatology, cryology, ecology, global environmental change, biogeochemical cycles, natural resources management

PE11 **Materials Engineering -** advanced materials development: performance enhancement, modelling, large-scale preparation, modification, tailoring, optimisation, novel and combined use of materials, etc.

Life Sciences

LS1 **Molecules of Life: Biological Mechanisms, Structures and Functions -** for all organisms: molecular biology, biochemistry, structural biology, molecular biophysics, synthetic and chemical biology, drug design, innovative methods, and modelling

LS2 **Integrative Biology: From Genes and Genomes to Systems -** for all organisms: genetics, epigenetics, genomics and other 'omics studies, bioinformatics, systems biology, genetic diseases, gene editing, innovative methods, and modelling, 'omics for personalised medicine

LS3 **Cell Biology, Development, Stem Cells, and Regeneration -** for all organisms: structure and function of the cell, cell-cell communication, embryogenesis, tissue differentiation, organogenesis, growth, development, evolution of development, organoids, stem cells, regeneration, therapeutic approaches

LS4 **Physiology in Health, Disease and Ageing -** organ and tissue physiology, comparative physiology, physiology of ageing, pathophysiology, inter-organ and tissue communication, endocrinology, nutrition, metabolism, interaction with the microbiome, non-communicable diseases including cancer (and except disorders of the nervous system and immunity-related diseases

LS5 **Neuroscience and Disorders of the Nervous System -** nervous system development, homeostasis and ageing, nervous system function and dysfunction, systems neuroscience and modelling, biological basis of cognitive processes and of behaviour, neurological and mental disorders - *In humans and all other organisms*

LS6 **Immunity, Infection, and Immunotherapy -** the immune system, related disorders and their mechanisms, biology of infectious agents and infection, biological basis of prevention and treatment of infectious diseases, innovative immunological tools and approaches, including therapies

LS7 **Prevention, Diagnosis and Treatment of Human Diseases -** medical technologies and tools for prevention, diagnosis and treatment of human diseases, therapeutic approaches and interventions, pharmacology, preventative medicine, epidemiology and public health, digital medicine

LS8 **Environmental Biology, Ecology and Evolution -** for all organisms: ecology, biodiversity, environmental change, evolutionary biology, behavioural ecology, microbial ecology, marine biology, ecophysiology, theoretical developments, and modelling

LS9 **Biotechnology and Biosystems Engineering -** biotechnology using all organisms, biotechnology for environment and food applications, applied plant and animal sciences, bioengineering and synthetic biology, biomass and biofuels, biohazards

Social Sciences & Humanities

SH1 **Individuals, Markets and Organisations -** economics, finance, management

SH2 **Institutions, Governance and Legal Systems -** political science, international relations, law

SH3 **The Social World and its Interactions -** sociology, social psychology, education sciences, communication studies

SH4 **The Human Mind and Its Complexity -** cognitive science, psychology, linguistics,

SH5 **Texts and Concepts -** literary studies, literature, philosophy

SH6 **The Study of the Human Past -** archaeology and history

SH7 **Human Mobility, Environment, and Space -** human geography, demography, health, sustainability science, territorial planning, spatial analysis

SH8 **Studies of Cultures and Arts -** social anthropology, studies of cultures, studies of arts.