



Södertörn University's Guide to the European Research Council's Grants

ERC funding schemes for frontier research

The ERC funding schemes follow a unique funding logic and promote research leadership in all career stages. The sole criterion for funding is scientific excellence, and most funding forms are reserved for individual, non-collaborative research projects that are groundbreaking in their character, thus may carry a high level of potential risks for failure (scientific feasibility needs to be well argued in the proposal). The ERC awards flexible, long-term funding for a period of up to five years for the Starting, Consolidator and Advanced Grants. The grants provide a great opportunity to grow as a research leader, even for early career researchers, a level of freedom in doing research that is rarely matched by other research funding schemes.

Starting Grants: up to 5 years, 1,5 M EUR
Consolidator Grants: up to 5 years, 2 M EUR
Advanced Grants: up to 5 years, 2,5 M EUR

It is important that you take sufficient time to form and distill your research project idea and ensure that the research concept and the scope meet the requirements in the latest published ERC **Work Program, the Guide for Applicants, as well as the Guide for Peer Reviewers**.

These funding schemes are specific only to the ERC so plan sufficient time to write and rework your application. How long you need to spend will vary but it is often said to be 2-3 months full-time effort to prepare a successful application.

Each of the grants, Starting Grants, Consolidator Grants, Advanced Grants have their own specification for what they define as excellent researcher profiles, and the specification is part of the eligibility rules, you need comply with.

The Starting Grant funding scheme focuses on support for excellent Principal Investigators at the career stage at which they are starting their own independent research team or program (2-7 years after earning their doctoral degree).

The Consolidator Grant funding scheme focuses on support for excellent Principal Investigators at the career stage at which they may still be consolidating their own independent research team or program (7-12 years after earning their doctoral degree).

The Advanced Grant funding scheme focuses on well-achieved research leaders with a recognized track record of research results. To meet the ERC's requirements of having the

capacity for groundbreaking results and moving forward the frontiers of science, the applicant shall present a track record that matches the excellent researcher profile described in the ERC's Work Programme. An excellent Advanced Grant applicant is a recognized research leader still productive, not having passed their career peak, and their scientific track record clearly reflects their leadership.

Re-submission rules: Re-submission rules depends on the grade of your application. If you go through to interview you are allowed to re-submit an application next year, if not you are blocked for 2 years.

Construction and writing the proposal

Why you? Why now? Why this project? – these questions need to be carefully answered in the proposal. The single criterion of evaluation for all ERC grants is scientific excellence. The term is broken down to two main components:

- on the one hand the groundbreaking nature of the project (frontier research, challenging current paradigms), the ambition carrying with itself clear scientific risks (high risk / high gain) and its feasibility (risk mitigation / back-up plan / managing risks);
- on the other hand the capacity, (in starting grants the “potential”), the commitment and creativity of the PI (based on information in the CV and the track record.

The funding is meant to support individual research projects (with some exceptions), in which you are expected to build a research team (mostly of doctoral students and postdocs) working under your instructions in the project. The project is expected to focus on your expertise, thus any collaborations with peer scientists need to be fully justified.

B1 & B2: Part B1 of the proposal, also called the extended synopsis with CV and track record is reviewed by peer reviewers (3-4 people assigned to your proposal from the panel), at this phase, they do not see Part B2 of your proposal. If your B1 is retained, then your proposal, B1 and B2 together is sent to external experts for review. External reviewers give their written assessment and forward questions which the interview panel may pose. If your B1 does not make it through the first step (filtering), no one will read your B2. Do not refer or copy/paste between B1 and B2.

Peer reviewers in the first review phase (Step1 reading B1) are “generalists”, established and achieved researchers in your broader field, but not necessarily experts of your research area, thus you need to write in very clear language avoiding (and explaining where unavoidable) the jargon of your research field. B2 is read by external experts in your field, thus the language and formulation can be adapted, albeit clarity is still essential.

CV and track record: should be easy to identify the strong points and credentials. Leadership signifiers can be various, but should all be highlighted here, like PI experience, including mentoring of young researchers and supervising doctoral students. (Positions / founding members of networks, groups, platforms, professional/scientific associations, editorial positions, keynote addresses, etc.)

Structure and language: The proposal should adhere to ERC guidelines regarding structure. But take extra care regarding clarity of aims, hypotheses / research questions, and

to use subheadings and bullets, tables, diagrams, graphics, etc. The peer review process may include any researcher anywhere from the world, so the state-of-the-art description need to be written from a truly international perspective.

Abstract: (Part of B1) The title and the abstract should be clear and comprehensible, no claims to be made whatsoever that cannot be verified independently. Based on the title, abstract and choice of subject terms, your choice of panel may be disregarded by the consent of both Panel Chairs, so consistency and clarity are key.

Panel: The evaluation panel structure and the proposal format (B1/B2, application format) are sometimes modified slightly, but are almost the same each year. The Work Programme and the Guides are published well ahead of the opening of the call for proposals, so the sooner you start, the better the outcome will be (bear in mind the re-submission rules). According to experience many successful grant applicants have applied more than once in each so called career group, so do not wait too long with your first application: Starting Grant: 2-7 years; Consolidator Grant: 7-12 years, Again consider the re-submission rules).

Choose your panel carefully (depending on your research topic, you may not have much of a choice, but if you are truly inter/multidisciplinary in your approach, you may have several panels to choose from). Panel members names are published for previous years and there is a rotation of the members every two years, so you can have an idea about the level of prior knowledge in your panel. The names of the Panel Chairs however are published prior to each call for proposal.

Planning

For any ERC-proposal, it is key to have several rounds of self-organized peer reviewing before submitting. Seek out people who know the ERC funding schemes' logic, or themselves have applied (maybe even been ERC grantees) and are available for reviewing and commenting your proposal prior to submission. It is often of great help to get your proposal read and commented by colleagues who do not belong to your immediate research area, thus can be of support in terms of clarity and formulation "on a proper level". It can be helpful to organize mock-interview sessions already prior to the submission of the proposal in order to review any weak points of the proposal prior to a potential interview, since you submit B1 and B2 at the same time. In order to accommodate several drafts, readings and mock interviews, to calculate a time frame of 6 months and the net worktime of 2-3 months is often mentioned as essential to dedicate.

Support

Grants Office: Support from the Research Advisors and Finance Officer is available and recommended to take advantage of early on in the process. The Grants Office keep up to date with year-to-year changes. Budgeting for long-term major funding projects is both a complex exercise and in the case of ERC, requires a great deal of co-funding from the university, specifically the Vice-chancellor's written approval. Co-funding by the University of the projects overhead costs (OH) is required, because indirect project costs are funded by the ERC up to 25% of the direct project costs, but that does not cover all costs calculated as the University's OH for projects. Furthermore, a signed Commitment Letter of the Host Institution shall be submitted together with the application, that takes time to process.

It is thus recommended to contact grantsoffice@sh.se och projektansokningar@sh.se
(Finance Department's contact email for supporting project applications):

- Budgeting and co-funding calculation, acquiring the vice-chancellor's approval, Commitment Letter of Host Institution: **1 month before deadline at the latest**, but preferably a couple of months before deadline.

- Proposal Review (support with structuring, layout, etc.): **2 months before deadline at the latest**, but strongly recommended to contact earlier than that.

Senior colleagues / peers: Since this bit of funding is about scientific excellence of your proposal (which is not meant to be collaborative), it is essential to build your own peer-review process before the submission. If your proposal is retained, you will get to be interviewed by the panel, where questions are mostly aimed at the main ERC funding criteria: scientific excellence and ambition, groundbreaking nature and feasibility (high risk – high gain); scientific capacity and profile.

VR and other forums: there are seminars and training sessions at a regular interval offered by the ERCEA (the Executive Agency managing the application and granting process of the ERC Grants), and by the Swedish Research Council.

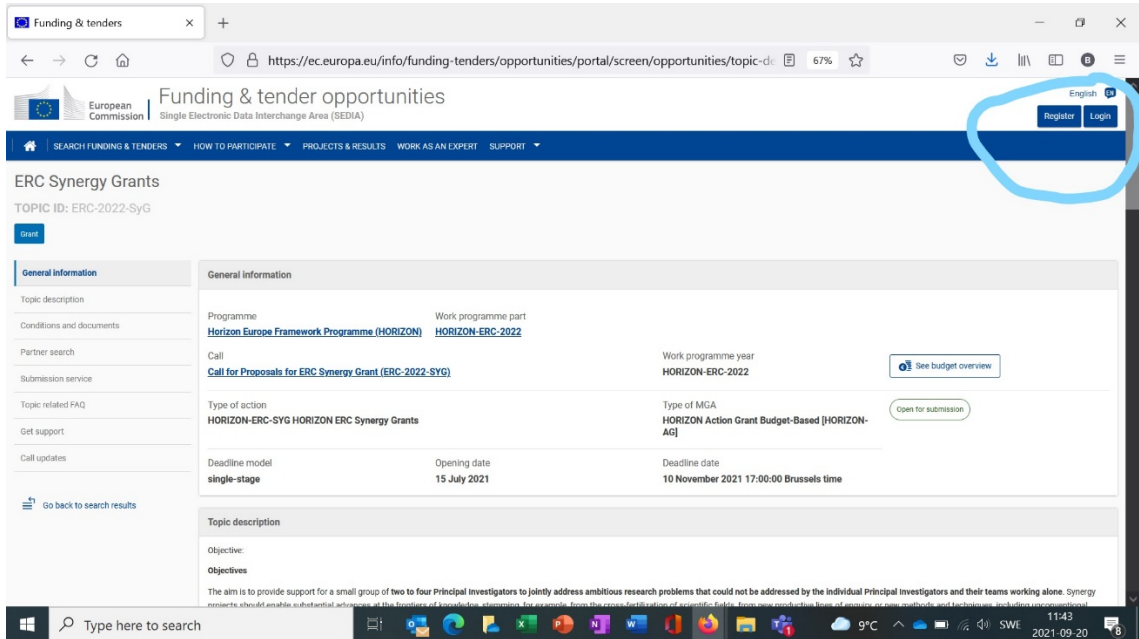
Consultants: there are specialized consultancy services available in Sweden and in Europe which you may wish to utilize for certain aspects (proposal review, interview training or speech training and presentation technique for example). Contact grantsoffice@sh.se if you plan to utilize such services.

Please note! Creating the necessary visual tools (infographics, tables, structural design, etc.) and the layout may take a much longer time than what usually remains at the end of the process, so do not leave it to the last days!

Submission

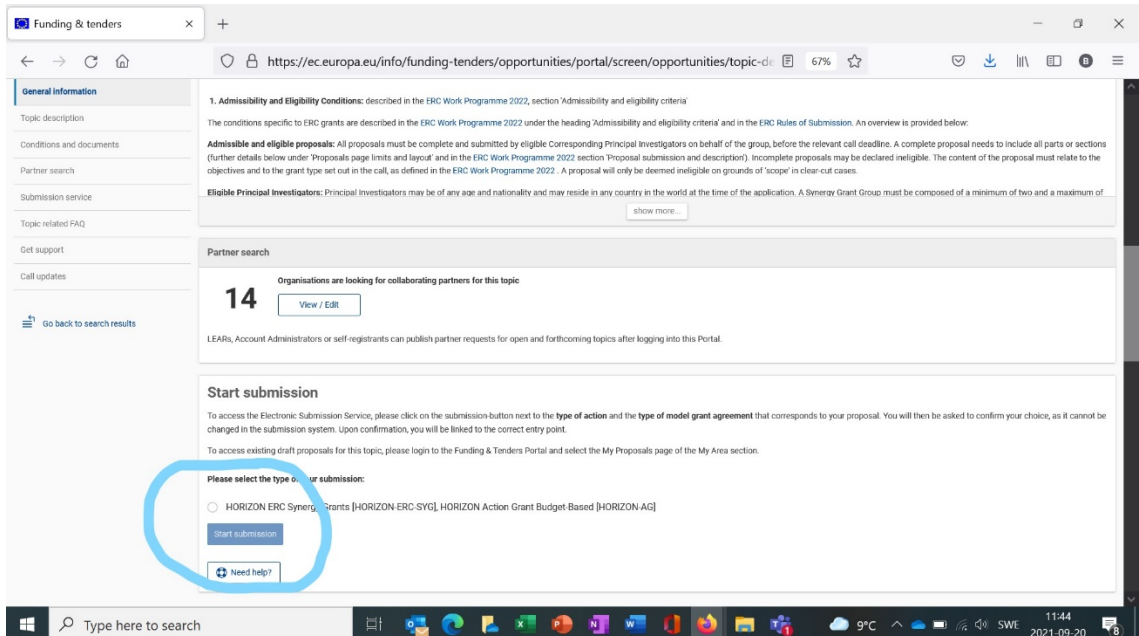
Submission is done via the **Funding & Tenders Portal**, where you can filter calls within Horizon Europe, Pillar 1 (Excellence), European Research Council.

You need to have a ECAS EU Login ID to enter the application site. It is an easy registration but verifying your data may take some time.



Picture Nr 1: Screenshot of the Portal "Funding & tender opportunities" with a hand drawn circle in the upper right corner to show where to click on the Register button.

Submission is done via the application site which you can reach by clicking on the *Start submission* button under the link of the call for proposal for the respective ERC Grant at the Funding & Tenders Portal of the European Commission.



Picture Nr 2: Screenshot of the Portal "Funding & tender opportunities" after one clicked on the Call for Proposal link, with a hand drawn circle in the lower left corner to show where to click on the Start submission button.

You need to fill out the Form A: administrative data, couple of related questions and the ethics self-assessment sheet. Let us know at grantsoffice@sh.se if you need any assistance with this part. Do not forget to add the finance officer and the research advisor to

your application as organizational contacts, so we get also notifications from the Portal and can also follow through your submission, and assist you in the quickest way if you need support during the process.

Upload the required files (B1, B2, Signed Letter of Commitment, documentation of PhD, other supporting documents for parental leave or similar, etc.).

Upload and verify the proposal (B1&B2) over and over again (as you change/amend), well before deadline, so to avoid technical risk and time constraints in the end, right before the deadline passes.

Evaluation Process

You can read about the Evaluation Process in detail in the Info Guide and the Work Program, and you may want to even look at the instructions for the Evaluators, which is also published in the same place at the ERC website: **Starting Grants, Consolidator Grants, Advanced Grants.**

Tips

- Inspiration: you can find many inspirational materials on the ERC website, and they have a Youtube channel with a lot of interesting videos, including the “How I got my ERC Grant?”-series and the ERC Class, providing some support in writing and structuring the proposal. Try to find peers in your field who have ERC-experience and talk to them about your concerns, interests and questions.
- There are many delegates in SUA (Sveriges Unga Akademi) who have firsthand experience of ERC and can provide you with interesting insights and support.
- Proposal Writing Workshops: Södertörn University organizes proposal writing workshops regularly (though maybe not very often), and writing workshops are also arranged on Department / subject field level. Ask your colleagues/professors if there are any upcoming workshops to utilize this format for gaining feedback on your research proposal idea.
- If you deem specialized consult support to be necessary, you may pitch this idea to your Head of Department within the framework of capacity building / career development. Contact grantsoffice@sh.se if you would like to discuss the options.

Good luck with your proposal!

Huddinge, 2021-10-12