Tips and Example Questions for the ERC Interview (Starting and Consolidator Grant)

Version July 5, 2019

Example Picture of the new evaluation/interview rooms at the ERC Executive Agency (ERCEA), Brussels

The present compilation of tips and example questions for the ERC interview in Brussels is based on several sources, in particular on experience reports shared by ERC Interviewees and on feedback provided by trainers in the context of ERC interview trainings

ERC evaluation step 2: What happens before, during and after the interview?

You are invited for an interview on your Starting or Consolidator Grant application if your proposal has been favourably rated in step one of the ERC evaluation process. The overall success rate in step one is approximately 25-30%. Only part B1 is read by usually four panel members (out of the ~ 12-16 members that constitute the respective ERC panels) in step one.

In step two, the full proposal (B1 and B2) is read both by the four panel members (who frequently will be generalists rather than specialist in your field) and the specialist remote referees (usually two to three) whom these panel members have suggested. Thus the proposal is entirely new to the specialist referees, who can question every aspect of the proposal even if it was favourably evaluated in step one.

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. Only the panel members will be present at the interview. They may also ask questions by quoting from evaluation comments by remote referees.

The four panel members who favourably evaluated your proposal at step one can be seen as your "advocates". They give you the opportunity to personally outline your project and your (long-term) research vision, answer possibly surprising questions, dispel e.g. methodological doubts and altogether present yourself as convincing principal investigator of a groundbreaking project. The interview also provides the important chance to convince the other panel members who did not read your proposal of the unique character and promise of your proposal.

Follwing the interview, the panel will discuss all proposals and prepare the final ranking list. Afterwards, all evaluation reports have to be compiled and checked by the ERC Executive Agency, which is a main reason why it takes several weeks in addition before you are informed about the final result of the evaluation.

Important - No contact allowed with peer reviewers: In case you meet panel members/peer reviewers whom you know after you submitted your proposal, do not ask any question or provide any comment that even remotely touches upon your proposal, the interview or evaluation process in general. Otherwise the risk is extremely high that your proposal will be excluded from the evaluation process, as also experience has shown.

Venue/travel

- We recommend arriving one day early, ideally not later than on the early afternoon of the day before the interview. Flights to Brussels are quite often delayed (there is also still a high alert level in Brussels), and it is usually helpful to be able to have a look at the interview venue the day before.

- It is advisable to choose a quiet hotel (room)

Some experiences of Candidates:

- *My hotel (Hotel des Colonies) was almost across the street from the "Convent Garden" where the interview took place. That hotel is overpriced, but okay, because it's a quiet side street. Others were in the "Hotel Le Dome" around the corner and were unhappy about their noisy rooms*

- *I booked in the Crown Plaza, it is probably 20 m away from the Covent Garden center, extremely convenient. It was rather expensive (135 euro/night, maybe because i book just the week before) but it was excellent. Some of the panel members (PM) were also accommodated there, btw. I knew i would spend a* lot of time *in my room preparing myself scientifically and mentally and i wanted to be in a confortable place. Wireless was free, room was nice and quiet, service and breakfast was excellent. Fully worth the money in this special situation*

- *I treated myself to stay in the Hilton. It is literally door to door with the ERC building*

- *I arrived a day early at the very nice, comfy and quiet hotel Be Manos near the Midi train station. I took a walk and checked out the location and general atmosphere of the ERC building. (On a side note: The hotels close to the ERC (Hilton, Sheraton, Dome) are squeezed in between a major road, the ERC building and a large construction side.) Opposite the Be Manos hotel is a very good Brasserie named L'escale.*

- *Hotel Thon: perfect location on the Place Charlies Rogier just on the other side of the place where the ERC building is, close to Brussel North train station, silent and very good air conditioning. No complete shades on the windows though, and 150€ per night without breakfast, but well, thats just Brussels.*
  Restaurants nearby: Brussels Grill solid, Pomodoro has good pasta and pizzas. The starbucks in the Rogier metro is also convenient, so is the food court in the basement of the large shopping center above Rogier metro.

"Dress code"

While there is no dress code for ERC interviews, and experiences between panels vary, there appears to be a trend towards more formal clothing for the interview in recent years (e.g. shirt and jacket rather than a sweater/T-shirt). Most importantly, you should feel comfortable in your clothes. If in doubt, we suggest to choose a more formal wear.

Slides

- Provide a **narrative** in your presentation, including the "big picture". This will support you in engaging also those panel members who are not in your field

- Decide on your narrative first and prepare the slides afterwards (rather than building a narrative with slides you already prepared previously). The presentation should come across as a story and not as if you were going through a "checklist"

- Your slides should **illustrate** what you are saying, but not contain all the information – the panel members should be prompted to look at you rather than at the slides.
- Avoid overloading the slides with details or rushing through a too high number of slides
- Figures/graphs should be meaningful and not merely decorative
- Ensure comfortable font size, consistent capitalization, coherent layout, and good readability (colours/contrast) even in case of a less-than-optimal beamer
- Take particular care in preparing the **first and the last slide**: The last slide will remain displayed during the discussion (and is thus ideal for a summary of the project and your research vision). The first slide will likely already be on display when you walk into the interview room.
- Prepare a **pdf-Version** in case ppt/Mac does not work
- Prepare **handouts** for the panel (see also specific instructions by the ERC for each panel). A picture of the PI on the first slide of the handout will help panel members later when they discuss all the interviews
- Usually it is possible to include back-up slides in your presentation that you could use during the discussion session, in case more detailed questions are asked on timeline/milestones, budget or team composition. However, the back-up slides seem to be hardly ever used.
- Whenever possible, answer questions directly rather than flicking back through slides "in search for an answer".

General tips and example questions

- Check the instructions you have received for the interview by your ERC panel (timing, hand-outs, etc.). **Timing** is kept very **strictly.**
- **Re-check your proposal** to identify possible open questions/ambiguities/"weak spots" that could be addressed by reviewers in the hearing, e.g. more information on methodology, risk management, team composition, choice of case studies or recent scientific developments (→ competing approaches)
- Memorize at least the first and last sentences of your talk
- A catchy start will help to capture the panel's attention
- Do not read from the slides, but face the panel - the panel members should look at you. (In the new interview facilities, ERC Candidates typically stand on a podium facing the panel)

- Practice the talk also at least once **without slides**
- If you have a tendency to speak quickly, be conscious about it to ensure comfortable speed
- Pronounce clearly
- Avoid "hands in pockets" ☺
- Avoid empty words/ filling phrases such as "basically", "obviously", "as I already said before"
- **Think about the best way to link from one slide to the next**: Rhetorical questions would not seem the best approach to do so, at least this method should not be used too often
- Expect the unexpected: Panel members will try to ask questions you have not been asked before, and to see how you react "under pressure".
  →Take a moment to think before answering a question. Also apparently simple questions may have a catch.
- **Keep your answers short and to the point**. Panel members can always ask a follow-up-question if they want further information. In general, panel members will be less interested in your answer as such – above all, they will seek to determine if you know the answer or not.
- **Never interrupt** a question, even if it is lengthy.
- Say "I am planning to…" rather than "I am thinking of…"
- If a panel member appears to have misunderstood something, you could say "perhaps I gave the impression that…"; "I had no time in my brief presentation to explain X" or similar, but not "it is wrong/not correct that…"
- In the discussion, do not start your reply with a phrase like "This is a very good question,…", "thank you for the question" or similar.

The PI, the Team, the Host Institution

- Describe your position vis-à-vis the competitors (who are your main competitors?); your competitive/unique advantage
- Recognize the work of others
- Prepare to explain about your independence as PI versus your embedment in the Host Institution

- *Why is this work best carried out at your Host Institution, and not e.g. in the USA,…?*
- *Describe your team and your recruiting strategy*
- *What is your strategy for selection of collaboration partners, e.g. with competitors?*
- *Expertise in area X/method Y seems to be missing in your project…?*
- *Your interaction with other ERC grant holders at the institution?*
- *What are your main achievements so far?*
- *Why will the ERC Grant be crucial for you at this stage?*
- *Do you have a permanent position at your institution without the ERC grant?*

The Project

- Present the aims of the project clearly.
- Provide a good overview on the project structure, as this facilitates orientation in particular if you focus on specific aspects later
- Be explicit on what exactly is the core novelty of your project
- Panel Members may ask questions that aim at relating your work to their own research field. This is an opportunity to "invite them on board". The answer should therefore never be "area x/application y is not of interest for this project", but as inclusive as possible
- Preliminary work presented should not give the impression that a large part of the work has already been done, so that there would only be limited need for ERC funding. The project should thus not come across as a "mere extension of previous work". → Describe the preliminary work as pilot study/proof of concept, and focus on what is new in the project
- Prepare for questions on the scope of the project – "too broad/unfocused" or "too narrow"
- What impact of the ERC project on your field (and possibly beyond) do you envisage beyond the project duration? What is your more long-term **research vision?** (5-10 years)
- Present (a) testable hypothesis/hypotheses for your project or, if this is not usual in your field, provide clearly formulated research questions. Which important research gap/currently intractable problem do you aim to tackle? → To avoid a potential perception of the project as a "fishing expedition" (e.g. in case of screens in the Life Sciences) or a "largely methods/technology-driven"-approach.

- Consider whether it may be better to **focus** on 1-2 particularly important objectives and/or examples instead of trying to get across too many messages during the presentation

- *What would you do if equipment X/PostDoc Nr. 2 were not funded by the ERC?* (It should be clear from your answer that this would limit the impact of your project as you have carefully planned your budget; you would apply for alternative funding sources,…)

- *What is unique about your project?*

- *Why is your project timely?*

- Validation of project results*: How will you know that you have succeeded? How will you interpret results? E.g. statistical power analysis,…?*

- *What is the key risk of the project? How do you deal with it, what is your plan B?*

- *This is a mainly correlative approach (?) – how are you going to establish causality?*

- *How could you test this hypothesis?*

- *What is your focus now, what are your priorities*?

- *Would this research not better be funded by industry*?

- *How do you use the rest of your working time?*

- *What are milestones/intermediate goals of your project?*

Further tips: Example weblinks

- http://liston.vib.be/blog/2011/9/4/advice-on-applying-for-an-erc-start-grant-part-1.html

- http://www.uni-kl.de/fileadmin/euref/pdf/ERC-Praesentation-2012-08-16-Widera.pdf

- https://www.wlv.ac.uk/media/departments/project-support-office/6.-Piet-Van-Duppen_Testimony-of-an-expert-evaluator.pdf

- https://web.infn.it/fep/images/H2020/ConsigliPratici/evaluatorPerspective.pdf

- http://www.researchfundingtoolkit.org/one-line-answers-to-tricky-questions/