

ERC Starting Grant Call 2020: Notes and Tips for Applicants (Version Sep 13, 2019)

Quick overview: Starting Grant Call 2020

Deadline: October 16, 2019 17:00 CET

- **Reference date** for the “Starter” and “Consolidator” eligibility window: **January 1st, 2020**
- **Waiting time** for **resubmission** of ERC proposals that failed in **step 1** of the evaluation: 1 year for proposals evaluated as category B, 2 years for category C proposals (most likely). Proposals that proceed to **step 2** but are not funded can most likely be resubmitted “immediately” (to ERC calls of Work programme 2021 in the next Framework Programme, Horizon Europe)
- **Structural change:** The previous **section c) resources of part B2 has been transferred to the online submission form** (section 3, max 8.000 characters), **but counts towards the 15 pages limit for B2** (excluding the online budget table)
- **Additional funding of up to 1 Mio EUR** possible in exceptional, defined circumstances
- **Literature references do not count towards page limits** (B1+B2)
- **Track Record:** Presentation of **up to 5** publications; **preprints** may be included, if freely available from a preprint server
- **MD/PhD-equivalency:** M.D. + clinical training alone does not render a M.D. degree a PhD-equivalent; a proof of an appointment that requires doctoral equivalency is necessary in addition
- **Clinical training** can lead to a prolongation of the “eligibility time window” of **up to 4 years maximum** –see ERC Work Programme 2020, p17
- Dedicated **textbox to explain cross-panel/cross-domain nature** of proposal – only to be used if a second panel is selected (on cover page of B1)
- **Mandatory Funding ID annex** to indicate ongoing, submitted and previous grants
- Request for **exclusion of up to three reviewers** possible without justification
- **Open Access** is mandatory, related costs can be charged to the project
- ERC beneficiaries will automatically be covered by the H2020 provisions on **research data sharing** unless they specifically decide to opt-out; related costs can be charged to the project
- **Ethical issues table** needs to be completed online; **ethics self-assessment annex to be provided if any issue** in the ethical issues table applies (no template)
- **Minimum 50% of the PIs total working time** needs to be committed to the ERC project, and the PI needs to spend minimum 50% of his/her total working time in Europe or a Horizon 2020-Associated Country, even if the salary of the PI is not charged to the project
- **Written consent by all proposal participants/collaborators needs to be documented**, e.g. by an email dated before the call deadline, but not submitted with the application (online form, section “Declarations”)

Important documents and useful links

Please consult in particular the following two documents:

- **ERC Work Programme 2020 (legally binding)**
http://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/wp/2018-2020/erc/h2020-wp20-erc_en.pdf
- **Information for Applicants to the Starting and Consolidator Grant Call 2020**, including the detailed panel expertise keywords:
http://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/other/guides_for_applicants/h2020-guide20-erc-stg-cog_en.pdf

- ERC Homepage: erc.europa.eu
- Participant Portal: Link to proposal submission for **StG 2020**:
<http://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/portal/desktop/en/opportunities/h2020/topics/erc-2020-stg.html>
- **ERC Standard Proposal template** for the Starting/Consolidator Grant, including administrative forms and Letter of Commitment of the Host Institute: available via the online submission tool after registration, at step 5
- ERC Starting Grant 2020 Applicant Mailbox for queries related to the call:
ERC-2020-STG-APPLICANTS@ec.europa.eu
- Link to previous **ERC panel members (frequently generalists)**:
 - <https://erc.europa.eu/document-category/evaluation-panels>
We recommend to use the lists of previous panel members to understand the different backgrounds and perspectives from which panel members may view your proposal. ERC panel members alternate between even and odd years, while several of the panel members will usually be replaced by new ones. It is therefore advisable to check in particular the panel member lists for the Call 2018 in order to arrive at an idea about the possible composition of panel members for 2020.

The Panel Chairs for the ERC Starting Grant Call 2020 are listed at

https://erc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document/file/erc_2020_stg_panel_chairs.pdf

- Link to lists of previous **ERC external referees (specialists)** and panel members:
<https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/how-to-participate/reference-documents;programCode=H2020> (select button “expert names – annual lists”)

- Link to **database of ERC-funded projects**:
<https://erc.europa.eu/projects-figures/erc-funded-projects>
Here you can search for ERC project summaries and Principle Investigators of ERC grants. Search results can be filtered e.g. by panel and keywords. Project abstracts and the CVs of Principal Investigators funded by the panel you consider applying for may prove helpful for deciding on the most suitable evaluation panel, and for comparing CVs/track records of PIs.
- ERC webpage on **open access**: <https://erc.europa.eu/funding-and-grants/managing-project/open-access>
- Guidelines on Implementation of Open Access to Scientific Publications and Research Data (ERC):
https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/other/hi/oa-pilot/h2020-hi-erc-oa-guide_en.pdf

Online submission of ERC proposals: Submit early, submit often

We strongly recommend to **submit a first version of your proposal around 1 week before the deadline**, in order to check for any browser problem or other technical issues that may block proposal submission, or lead to layout changes in the submitted versions. Up to the call deadline, **you can continuously modify your proposal by submitting (not just uploading) a new version, which will overwrite the previous one**.

In case of problems with the online submission system, please contact your **host institution** (grant management/researchers' service), **FFG** (ylva.huber@ffg.at) or directly the SEP Service Desk: DIGIT-EFP7-SEP-SUPPORT@ec.europa.eu or +32 (2) 29 92222.

Information on how to use the online submission system is also available via the submission service user manual: http://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/support/sep_usermanual.pdf

Please ensure that all the **required supporting documents are obtained and submitted** via the submission tool in time (Commitment letter of the Host Institution, ethical issues annex [ethical self-assessment and any additional documents related to ethics], other supporting documents as applicable)

Also, please note the remark on "Declarations" in the online forms - **Written consent**:

The Principal Investigator declares to have the written consent of all participants on their involvement and on the content of this proposal, as well as of any researcher mentioned in the proposal as participating in the project (either as other PI, team member or collaborator). The ERCEA may request the applicants to provide the written consent of all participants at any time during the evaluation process.

The written consents should however not be submitted with the application. Consent can e.g. be documented by an **email** by the participant, which is **dated before the call deadline**.

Ethical issues: Online table and ethical self-assessment annex

- The **ethical issues table** needs to be completed online in the Participant Portal (PPSS). The page numbers to be indicated in the ethics table refer to part B2. It is possible to indicate several page numbers divided by '/' (e.g. 12/14).
- For each ethical issue that applies to your proposal, please 1) tick the appropriate box in the list and 2) provide information on your approach to these issues in the **ethics self-assessment** document. As there is **no template** for the ethics self-assessment, we suggest to use a plain word-document indicating the relevant topic(s) from the online-ethics section and to describe your strategy to deal diligently with these issues (e.g. which ethic approvals you will obtain, compliance with relevant national and European law/directives, anonymization of data, insurance, etc). Convert the document into **pdf** format and upload it as **ethics self-assessment annex** in the PPSS. Furthermore, you can upload additional annexes with ethics-related documents (e.g. examples of informed consent forms)
- A **guideline** on how to complete the ethical self-assessment is available at https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/grants_manual/hi/ethics/h2020_hi_ethics-self-assess_en.pdf
- **Please note:** The ethical self-assessment guide also refers to documents that may not be available at the stage of proposal submission but need to be provided at the stage of preparing the grant agreement, e.g. ethics approvals.
- The **ethical issues section will not be evaluated** during proposal evaluation, as communicated to FFG by the ERCEA: *“Any document related to ethics (including the ethics issues table) will not be made available to the ERC reviewers during the evaluation. Hence, they will not be instructed to look at them. The evaluators are not supposed to take ethic issues into account during evaluations. The ethics clearance is done by the ethics review after evaluation is final.”*
For proposals with immediate ethics issues, it is nonetheless *“advisable to include a short paragraph summarising how they will be dealt with and refer to ethics self-assessment/annexes.”*

Evaluating scientific excellence: Questions that StG reviewers need to answer

(ERC Work Programme 2020, p35)

1. Research Project

Ground-breaking nature, ambition and feasibility

Starting, Consolidator, Advanced and Synergy

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)?

To what extent is the proposed research high risk/high gain (i.e. if successful the payoffs will be very significant, but there is a higher-than-normal risk that the research project does not entirely fulfil its aims)?

Scientific Approach

To what extent is the outlined scientific approach feasible bearing in mind the extent that the proposed research is high risk/high gain (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 full Scientific Proposal)?

To what extent does the proposal involve the development of novel methodology (based on the full Scientific Proposal)?

To what extent are the proposed timescales, resources and PI commitment adequate and properly justified (based on the full Scientific Proposal)?

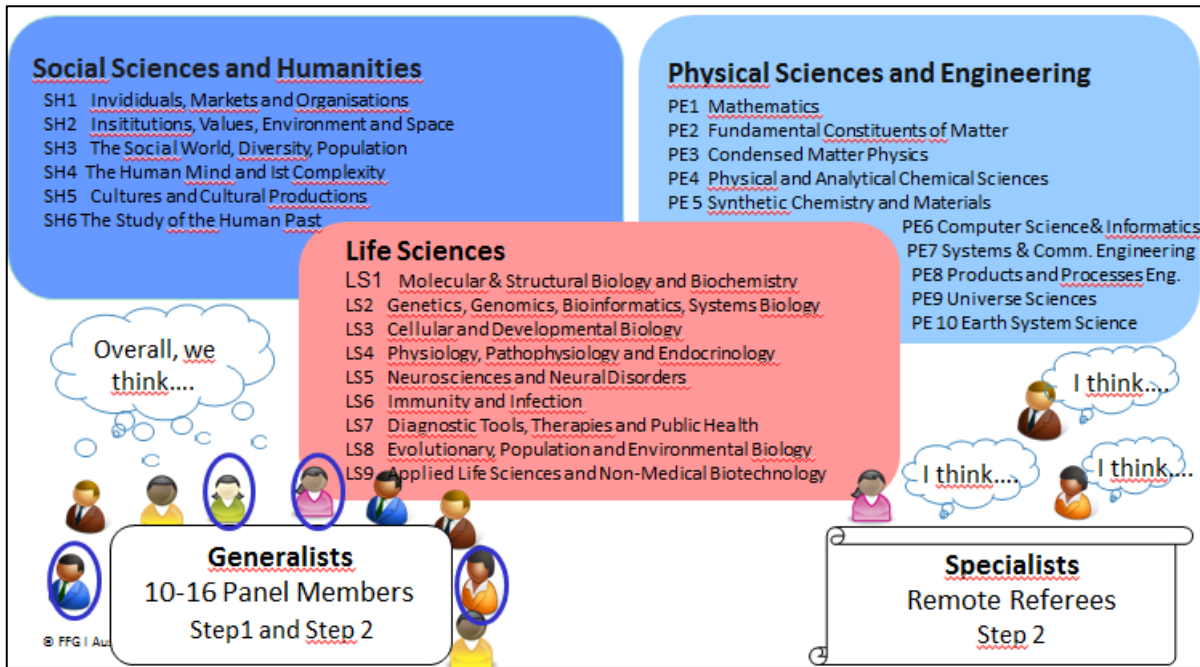
2. Principal Investigator (Starting and Consolidator)

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 independent thinking?

To what extent does the PI have the required scientific expertise and capacity to successfully execute the project?



Evaluation step 1: Usually **four Panel Members** (out of appr. 14-16), the majority of whom may often be **generalists** rather than specialists in the area(s) of your project, **read part B1 only**.

Evaluation step 2: The **full proposal (B1 and B2)** becomes accessible to the **panel members** and **specialist remote referees** (who are selected by the panel members). The final decision on the recommendation of a project for funding lies with the panel members.

Considerations and Tips for a convincing ERC Starting Grant proposal

Structure

- Provide a **clear structure**. Your proposal should read as a compelling, authentic **narrative**.
- Present the big picture to put your research into a broader **context** (appealing also to panel members who are not specialists in your field) and to **motivate your research goals**
- The introduction/motivation should, however, not dominate the proposal: The **major part** of the grant application (also in the extended synopsis/B1) should explain concretely your **novel approach** and **planned work** (as a rule of thumb: minimum 50 % of the extended synopsis in B1)

- Present the **aims/objectives** of your project rather early and in a highly visible manner (e.g. bullet points, bold fonts, text box). Panel Members like to see them at the first glance.
- The **perfect match between aims/objectives**, the **methodology** and the **workplan** of the project should be easy to perceive, e.g. by referring to aim(s) 1,2 when describing research line/workpackage x or method y). This will support the impression of a well-integrated, coherent proposal.

Part B1

is your “ticket to the interview”: a crucial element of the proposal that needs to communicate both the ambition and the feasibility of the project. The success rate for step1 of the evaluation process, where only Part B1 is assessed, was lately around 30% for the Starting Grant.

- The extended synopsis in B1 should contain **all important information** to evaluate both the breakthrough character and the feasibility of the project. This includes:
 - key **preliminary data**/results/proof of principle already obtained
 - risks and contingency strategies** (what are significant risks and your plan B, why does the project have a favourable risk-gain-balance)
 - how will you **validate** the results of your project? E.g. how will you determine causality, as opposed to “only” correlation?) → to show the **explanatory power** of your approach
- - any other important information that will underline the breakthrough potential of your proposal, e.g. **generalizability** of results
- Based on ERC evaluation comments, we strongly recommend to also include a paragraph/sentence on the **team composition** in B1 (message: the necessary expertise will be assembled in your team), as well as a **brief timeplan** (1-2 sentences, or putting timing information in brackets, e.g. “aim 1... [Year 1-3]” / “key intermediate goal x [Year 3]”).
- One or a few high quality **figure(s)** can also be very helpful for B1
- **References** to literature should be included. They do not count towards the 5 page-limit. The references in B1 may also support Panel Members in selecting the external referees to evaluate the proposal in step 2 of the evaluation.

Part B2

should present the required details for the evaluation by specialist reviewers in step 2. This concerns in particular the methodology, preliminary data, and risks and contingency plans.

- Avoid unnecessary repetition between part B1 and B2: As part B1 should capture the essence of the entire proposal, B1 and B2 need to be mutually consistent. However, panel members are increasingly likely to disapprove of longer sections with identical wording in B1 and B2. In part B2, you can also refer to figures/text presented in part B1.

- Present your **key intermediate goals** and expected **results** and how you will **validate/ interpret** results
- Highlight any **novel/unconventional methodology**
- Deal **appropriately with significant risks** (contingency plans, alternative strategies; promising preliminary data) - to further bolster the message of a favourable risk-gain-balance
- At least in most cases, reviewers will likely expect a reasonable **time plan** for an ERC project. It has meanwhile become standard in part B2 of ERC proposals to present e.g. a Gantt chart or overview table on **key intermediate goals/milestones** (see also example below). The time plan should however not be too detailed to be credible for a groundbreaking research agenda.

Fictitious example table for key intermediate goals

	Aim 1	Aim 2	Aim 3
Years 1-2	Analysis of... Publication 1...	Purify...	Visualize... Conference...
Years 3-4	Maps...	Integration of...	...
Year 5	Model...	Correlation of findings...	...Publications,...

- High quality **figure(s)** can play an important role to demonstrate feasibility and/or provide a crisp overview on the project.
- **References** to literature should be included (they do not count towards the 15 page-limit)

Further suggestions with relevance both for B1 and B2

Novelty and unique features

- Address explicitly the **ground-breaking nature** of the project (what is the core novelty?) and its potential scientific **impact**. Both the “immediate” impact on your field/other fields as well as your more **long-term-vision** (5-10 years or beyond) should be outlined.
- It should be evident for reviewers that your approach is **original, timely, genuinely novel**, and not an “extension” of (your) previous research. Explain the **unique features** and the advantage of your approach compared to **competing approaches**.

Hypothesis-driven project/clearly defined research questions

- While there can be differences between research fields/disciplines, ERC reviewers frequently comment positively on the fact that a project is hypothesis-driven. In any case, however, the overarching research questions should be clearly presented. Proposals that apparently lack such question(s) and come across as largely technology- or methodology-driven will likely be at a disadvantage.

Scope of the project: Justified approach

- As for any research proposal, also the scope of an ERC project can be questioned by reviewers – either as being too broad/unfocused or too narrowly focused/incremental. It is therefore important to explain why the approach you have chosen is the best strategy to achieve a breakthrough.

Clarity

- Your proposal needs to be **well understandable** also for **reviewers that are not specialists** in your own research field/topic.
- Important: **Precise wording**/descriptions, **clear** (working) **definitions**, concrete **examples**, high quality **figures**
- Ensure a **reader-friendly layout**, with sufficient spaces, highlighting key messages, e.g. by a short summary of a section in a text box, bullet points, selective use of bold fonts

Collaborations

- Strive for a good balance when describing collaborations for the project: explain their importance for the project, but without giving the impression of the PI being "too dependent" on them. Messages: Due to the excellent network of the PI, s/he will have access to all required complementary expertise and infrastructure. The collaborations are well-defined/targeted. This should avoid a potential impression of a project based on a consortium, as the ERC explicitly does not fund consortia (ERC Work Programme 2020, p9). If you think your project would actually require several PIs, the ERC Synergy Grant call (for a group of 2-4 PIs) could be an option.

Demonstrating a competitive “Starter” profile

- **CV, Track Record, State of the art:**
Make sure that your own contributions (e.g. in important co-authored papers) are clearly visible. “Research independence” of the PI should be evident throughout the proposal, i.e. not only shown in the CV and Track Record, but also in B1 and B2, for instance when presenting preliminary work/data (“As we could show in [ref.x]...”)

Which panel?

- Consider which panel is likely in the best position to understand the ground-breaking nature of your project, and to appreciate your previous achievements.
- While the ERC welcomes **interdisciplinary** projects, they constitute a challenge for the evaluation process, as these proposals need to be rated as excellent in every discipline they cover. If you consider your proposal to be interdisciplinary (cross-panel/cross-domain), you can indicate a secondary panel in the online-submission system. In this case, please describe the cross-panel/cross-domain nature in the dedicated text box on the B1 cover page.
However, we recommend to give some extra thought to this question, as so far the success rates of explicitly cross-panel proposals apparently has been lower. One reason for this might be that panel members from the secondary panel are, according to our information, not physically present during panel meetings, but only submit their written comments to the panel.
As an alternative to selecting two panels, you can choose only one panel, and add keywords from other relevant panels (as well as free keywords).
- Exceptionally, the ERC may also allocate a proposal to a different panel than the one indicated by the PI

Proposal Abstract

The abstract is an important part of the proposal, also during panel discussions. The majority of panel members may only read the abstract and possibly leaf through the proposals when they are discussed in the panel meetings. The abstract should therefore present the essence of your project: scientific challenge/knowledge gap, novel approach, objectives, potential impact, unique features.

Timely feedback-loops with colleagues

- Questions and critical comments of colleagues (both within and beyond your research field, ideally with a background similar to that of potential panel members) on the proposal will be highly valuable. In addition, polishing of the proposal by an English native speaker, where applicable, is highly recommended.

Specific remarks on B1-CV, Track Record and section 3- resources

B1, Section b: Curriculum vitae (max. 2 pages)

- In addition to the suggestions provided by the **CV template**, please present also key activities as reviewer for **journals** (top examples)
- Ensure an impeccable and reader-friendly **layout** also of the CV and Track Record section
- **Appendix to CV: All ongoing and submitted grants and funding of the PI (Funding ID)** - Mandatory

information not counting towards page limits

- According to the ERCEA, the information in this table is also used to support the selection of reviewers for the proposal (avoiding potential conflicts of interest with reviewers that might be involved in running/submitted projects with the applicant).

However, if several ongoing grants are listed which will temporally overlap with the ERC project, it is advisable to also demonstrate that **the PI will be able to fulfil his/her time commitment to the ERC project**, e.g. by indicating the percentage of time commitment of the PI for the other grants in the table.

- For submitted grant proposals which strongly overlap with the content of the ERC project, we recommend to add an explanatory sentence, e.g.: *In case both the X grant application and the ERC grant application are successful, I shall accept the ERC Grant and decline the X grant*
- You can also present the total amount of funding obtained by the PI so far (CV or Track record)

B1, Section c: Early achievements track-record (max. 2 pages)

- The typical **structure of the early track record** is provided in the **ERC Work Programme 2020, p24**
- In the early achievements track record, your most important publications (**up to five**) should be presented, highlighting those as main author and/or without the co-authorship of your PhD supervisor. You can also add field relevant bibliometric indicators (see ERC Work Programme 2020; Information for Applicants 2020). **Preprints** may be included, if freely available from a preprint server (preprints should be properly referenced and either a link to the preprint or a DOI should be provided).
- We recommend to provide **summary/overview information** for the reviewers (e.g. total number of publications, contributions to conferences, citations, h-index etc as applicable; weblink to full list of publications), as well as specific **“highlight information”**.
- For the list of five top publications in the track record, it is very advisable to **describe their significance and your contribution in 1-2 sentences**, e.g. in a textbox (“Here, we could show for the first time...”). Such summaries appear to be highly appreciated by panel members
- There is hardly any information available to date on how much attention ERC reviewers pay to the provision of listing only up to five publications in the Track Record. According to the ERC Executive Agency, *„the ‘up to 5 publications’ is not an eligibility issue but how strictly each panel will look at this in the evaluation is their own decision and cannot be predicted.“*
- We also recommend to mention any **further important papers of particular relevance for your ERC project** (i.e. in addition to the top 5) in the proposal as well, e.g. by integrating this information in a brief additional running text section in the Track record (“research profile”, “research interests”

or similar), and/or in the extended synopsis and B2.

New : Section 3) Resources (online submission form)

- As a change to previous calls, **the budget table and description of resources are now part of the online submission form (Section 3 - Budget). They should therefore not be included in Part B2.** However, we have received confirmation by the ERCEA that some information regarding resources, i.e. *“regarding the role of team members and collaborators”*, may be added in the usual (B2) sections *a and b*”, as has been the case also previously.
- The budget table and description of resources will be made available to panel members and remote referees. The **description of resources, without the budget table, counts towards the page limit of 15 pages for part B2** (Scientific Proposal). **4000 characters, font size 11, single line spacing in the online section 3, correspond to one text page in B2.** Maximum 8.000 characters (corresponding to two pages) can be used for the online section. As an example: If 6.000 characters (1,5 pages) are used for the online resources section, 13,5 pages remain available for part B2 to comply with the page limits.
- Apart from explaining the project costs in the adequate detail, section 3 is also suitable to present **detailed information on the team composition and expertise**, including the expertise requirements for Post Docs and PhD students that will be hired for the project.
- We also recommend to present relevant information on the **host institution/research environment** here, to strengthen the message of “the right project and team in the right place”.
- Present the composition and expertise requirements for your **team** (PhDs, Post Docs), as well as **working arrangements** (e.g. supervision of PhD students supported by Post-Docs; overall supervision and guidance by PI). Please consider: What is the ideal combination of PhD students and PostDocs for your project, how should PhD students “overlap” timewise to ensure optimal continuity of the project, etc? Reviewers may e.g. question whether certain tasks could be “too demanding for a PhD student” and should rather be allocated to a Post Doc; or conversely whether the selected tasks constitute a convincing PhD project.

Budget table – Remarks on specific cost categories

→ **Please contact the grant management office at your ERC host institution for support with the budget calculation**

- **Other direct costs** (with overhead flat rate): This category includes contracts to purchase goods, works or services, e.g. contract for a computer; contract for an audit certificate on the financial statements; contract for the publication of brochures; contract for the creation of a project website, contract for organization of the rooms and catering for a meeting, contract for hiring IPR consultants/agents. These costs do not arise from directly implementing the action tasks of the ERC project, but they are necessary to implement these tasks. As a change to previous regulations, overheads apply to these costs in Horizon 2020, as opposed to the case for subcontracts

http://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/grants_manual/amga/h2020-amga_en.pdf, 126-130)

- **Audit costs** should thus be included in the “**other direct costs**” category. In Horizon 2020, only **one audit** (certificate of the financial statement) is required at the end of the project, if the funding (direct costs) amounts to more than 325.000 EUR (i.e. one audit per ERC-project will suffice)
- **Subcontracting costs** (without overheads): Costs for subcontracts arise from the implementation of specific tasks which are part of the action (ERC project) by a third party. No overheads can be charged for these costs.
- **Equipment:** Please note that only **depreciation rates** (according to national rules) can be charged to the ERC for equipment. If the depreciation period of the equipment in question exceeds the duration of the ERC project, the remaining costs have to be carried by other means. Please contact your host institution in case of questions in this context.
- Costs for **consumables** also include fieldwork and animal costs
- The category for **internally invoiced goods and services** refers e.g. to access to internal services that are charged as unit costs
- Do not forget the possibility to include costs for publications, including **open access fees** (Article 29.2 of the ERC Model Grant Agreement). In Horizon 2020, each beneficiary must ensure open access to all peer-reviewed scientific publications relating to its results. Also costs related to **open access to research data** (Article 29.3. of the ERC Model Grant Agreement) can be charged.
- **Other direct costs with no overheads** : This category includes costs of resources made available by third parties which are not used on the premises of the beneficiary (= host institution), e.g. access to large research facilities owned by a third party and not used on the premises of the beneficiaries.
- **PI salary:** As a PI, you may request funding for your salary corresponding to the percentage of total working time dedicated to the ERC project (or a smaller fraction of that amount), even if you already receive a salary by your host institution. Funding of (part of) the PI’s salary can e.g. support the host institution in hiring a teaching replacement in case there is an agreement to reduce teaching obligations of a PI during the ERC project. Please consider, however, whether funding of the PI salary could result in a less-than-optimal number/experience level of team members due to budget constraints, as this needs of course to be avoided.

StG 2020 Evaluation Timeframe

Timeframe for sending information to applicants (ERC-2020-StG)	Physical Sciences & Engineering (PE)	Life Sciences (LS)	Social Sciences & Humanities (SH)
1. Results of eligibility check*		January	
2. Invitations for interviews	mid March	end March	early April
3. Results of Step 1 for non-retained applicants	mid May	mid May	mid May
4. Step 2 Interviews	end May	early June	beginning/mid June
5. Results of Step 2	end July / early August	end July / early August	end July/early August

* applies only to proposals declared ineligible

Updates at: <https://erc.europa.eu/timeframe-starting-grant-2020-evaluation-erc-2020-stg>