The following is a translation from Estonian. In case of disputes, the Estonian text will prevail.

Guidelines for evaluating returning researcher grant applications

1. Scope of Application

1.1. These guidelines establish the evaluation criteria and the principles for evaluating and compiling the ranking lists of the returning researcher grant applications.

1.2. The Estonian Research Council (hereinafter *Council*) is entitled to make well-considered decisions and consult experts where necessary in relation to matters not covered by these guidelines.

2. Evaluation of Grant Applications

2.1. The evaluation of the applications takes place in the Estonian Research Information System (hereinafter *ETIS*)

2.2. All applications are to be evaluated according to the same criteria and procedures in order to ensure equal treatment of all applications.

2.3. The final ranking list of the applications is formed by taking into consideration all relevant information and by comparing the applications in a single ranking list. The Expert Panel and the Evaluation Committee may use the overview of the bibliometric indicators of the returning researcher as an additional material for evaluating the applications.

2.4. The evaluation process follows a three-stage scheme:

    2.4.1. each application will receive a review by at least two independent reviewers;

    2.4.2. the Expert Panel will compile a combined evaluation for each application. Although nonbinding, the Expert Panel will rely on the scores and their justifications given by the reviewers;

    2.4.3. the Evaluation Committee is responsible for giving each application its final evaluation and for approving a single ranking list. Although non-binding, the Evaluation Committee shall rely on the combined evaluations given by the Expert Panel when forming the scores and their justifications in the final evaluation;

    2.4.4. The applications of equal standing will be ranked by the Evaluation Committee according to the principles described in clause 4.3.

3. Evaluation Criteria and Rating Scale

3.1. Evaluation Criteria

When evaluating the applications, the following evaluation criteria are to be used and the scores have to be justified. The justification is based on sub-criteria (i.e., 1.1, 1.2, etc.). If the score remains between two whole numbers (e.g., the score "Very good-Outstanding"), then it has to be explained what was missing from the higher whole number score (e.g., "Outstanding").

Evaluation criterion	Sub-criteria	Rating scale
1. Scientific justification for the research project, incl. the originality and relevance of the idea, potential contribution to the development of the research field; clarity and ambitiousness of objectives	1.1. How well and how clearly is the application justified? 1.2. How precisely are the research questions and/or (excl. justified exceptional cases) hypotheses defined? 1.3. How ambitious are the objectives of the project? 1.4. What is the contribution of the project to the development of the research field? 1.5. To what extent is the research idea original and/or relevant in the context of the research field? 1.6. Other noteworthy observations.	From 1 to 5
2. Feasibility of the research project (research plan, risk assessment), incl. the methods, resources, and infrastructure	2.1. How suitable and appropriate are the proposed research methods? 2.2. How reasonable and purpose-driven is the research plan and the distribution of the tasks? 2.3. How well does the returning researcher acknowledge potential scientific or methodological problem areas and how well are the risk reduction measures and the back-up plan described? 2.4. To what extent does the research environment, incl. the research infrastructure, support achieving the objectives of the proposed project? 2.5. Other noteworthy observations.	From 1 to 5
3. Competence and potential of the returning researcher, incl. his/her research activities during the past 10 years	3.1. What are the merits and scientific expertise of the returning researcher during the past 10 years? 3.2. How suitable are the scientific competences and experiences of the returning researcher for carrying out the proposed project successfully (e.g., postdoctoral studies or equivalent research qualification), participation in national and/or international research projects (considering that the returning researcher does not need to have previous team leadership and supervision experience)? 3.3. How well and how sufficiently has the returning researcher planned the activities of the project for the development of his/her future research career and towards becoming a successful PI (development of professional and transferable competences, training, supervision of the	From 1 to 5

	members of the research team, incl. doctoral students, intersectoral cooperation, etc.)? 3.4. Other noteworthy observations.	
4. Research ethics, incl. potential ethical risks related to the implementation of the project; use of research methods that require a review or approval from a specific ethics committee (the need for such approvals will be checked by the Expert Panel); compliance with the Nagoya Protocol	4.1. Has the returning researcher sufficiently, carefully, and properly assessed whether the project raises the issues of research ethics (e.g., questions related to human participation or involvement of animals; gender, age, cultural, etc. diversity issues; political, religious, societal, historical, and other sensitive topics; maintenance of biodiversity, environmental intervention, etc.)? 4.2. Has the returning researcher provided a description of the action plan to address the legal requirements of research ethics (e.g., ethics committee approvals, specific research protocols, etc.) and explained how the requirements are to be met during the course of the project? 4.3. Has the returning researcher sufficiently, carefully, and properly addressed potential research integrity risks which may arise during the project (e.g., credentials and questions of authorship, ownership of data and intellectual property, etc.)? 4.4. Other noteworthy observations.	From 0 to 1
5. Research data management, incl. issues related to the creation, collection, management, storage, and protection of data; will the data be shared or made public and in which way	5.1. Has the returning researcher sufficiently, carefully, and properly described research data management issues, incl. data storage and back-up, data protection, data ownership, (institutional) open data politics, etc.) 5.2. Has the returning researcher provided a description of the action plan to address the legal requirements of data management (e.g., the collection, management, storage, and destruction of sensitive data; field-specific data protection requirements, etc.) and explained how the requirements are to be met during the course of the project? 5.3. Other noteworthy observations.	From 0 to 1
6. Importance for Estonian culture, society, and/or economy *This criterion will be evaluated only by the Expert Panel and the Evaluation Committee*	6.1. How specifically and appropriately has the returning researcher described the necessity for new knowledge, incl. the importance of the project for Estonia outside academia (considering the specifics of the research field and topic)?	From 1 to 5

	6.2. How important are the expected results of the project for Estonian culture, society, and/or economy? Depending on the specifics of the research field and/or topic, the degree of importance may vary in the answers to one or several of the following questions: • Does the project address important topical challenges (incl. social and cultural issues), nationally and/or internationally? • Could the results of the project improve social welfare, social cohesion, and/or (cyber) security? • Could the results of the project help to solve important environmental challenges? • Could the results of the project initiate changes in policies, standards, strategic planning, guidelines, services, behaviours, etc.? • Does the project help to increase intersectoral cooperation and knowledge transfer (e.g., the project will be carried out between Estonian R&D institutions and/or government authorities and/or enterprises)? • Could the project contribute to innovation outside the realm of research, incl. could it encourage research-intensive entrepreneurship? • Could the project be impactful or significant in some way not listed above (please specify)? 6.3. How well are the plans for public outreach (dissemination of the results among the wider public outside academia) considered? 6.4. Other noteworthy observations.	
7. Justification for the budget *This criterion will be evaluated only by the Expert Panel and the Evaluation Committee.*	7.1. Is the project's level of experimentality properly chosen? 7.2. Is the estimation of the costs of the project realistic against the objectives? 7.3. Other noteworthy observations.	From 0 to 1

3.2. Rating scales and the formation of the final score

3.2.1. A nine-point differentiated rating scale is used for criteria 1, 2, 3, and 6:
- Outstanding (5);
- Very good-Outstanding (4,5);
- Very good (4);

- Good-Very good (3,5);
- Good (3);
- Satisfactory-Good (2,5);
- Satisfactory (2);
- Unsatisfactory-Satisfactory (1,5);
- Unsatisfactory (1).

3.2.2. A three-point differentiated rating scale is used for criteria 4, 5, and 7:
- Appropriate (1);
- Partially appropriate (0,5);
- Inappropriate (0).

3.2.3. Interpretation of ratings for criteria 1, 2, 3, and 6:

Unsatisfactory (1) – the application addresses many of the aspects of the evaluation criteria inadequately and/or there are serious inherent weaknesses.

Satisfactory (2) – the application addresses most of the aspects of the evaluation criteria in very general terms and there are significant weaknesses. Major revision and clarification would be needed to improve the application.

Good (3) – the application addresses most of the relevant aspects of the evaluation criteria well, but a number of shortcomings are present. Some questions could be elaborated on more thoroughly and more clearly. A sound research project with some issues to be considered.

Very good (4) – the application addresses most of the relevant aspects of the evaluation criteria very well and only a small number of shortcomings or issues to be considered are present. Minor revision and clarification would be suggested.

Outstanding (5) – the application is remarkably well elaborated and all sub-criteria of the evaluation criteria have been met at an excellent level. An exceptionally strong application in all respects.

3.2.4. Interpretation of ratings for criteria 4, 5, and 7:

Appropriate (1) – there are no shortcomings.

Partially appropriate (0.5) – there are some shortcomings or issues to be considered (adding an explanation is obligatory).

Inappropriate (0) – there are very significant shortcomings (adding an explanation is obligatory).

3.2.5. The final score will be formed by summing up the scores given to the evaluation criteria. For criterion 6 (Importance for Estonian culture, society, and/or economy), the coefficient 0.8 is applied. The final score can range from 3.8 to 22 points.

3.3. Threshold

Qualification threshold is used when evaluating the applications.

The qualification threshold for criteria 1, 2, 3, and 6 is 3 points (good) before applying the coefficient. The qualification threshold for criteria 4, 5, and 7 is 0.5 points (partially appropriate). If the application receives less points than the threshold, then it does not qualify for funding.

4. Overall assessment and the formation of the ranking list

This section will be filled in by the Evaluation Committee.

4.1. The Evaluation Committee is responsible for compiling the overall assessment for each application, in which the main strengths and weaknesses underlying the final score will be pointed out.

4.2. Based on the final scores given to the applications, the Evaluation Committee will compile a single ranking lists for all applications.

4.3. If the budget is too small for approving all the applications which have passed the quality threshold, then the procedure for making the funding proposals by the Evaluation Committee will be as follows:

    4.3.1. the projects will be funded in the order they appear in the ranking list;

    4.3.2. the applications of equal standing will be ranked according to the scores received during the evaluation process in the following order of the evaluation criteria: 3, 1, 2, 4, 5, and 7;

    4.3.3. the applications which sustain equal standing after the ranking procedure described in 4.3.2 will be prioritised by giving preference to the returning researchers who have previously received Estonian state funding in order to carry out a postdoctoral research project abroad;

    4.3.4. the applications which sustain equal standing after the ranking procedure described in 4.3.3 will be prioritised according to the evaluation criterion 6;

    4.3.5. the applications which sustain equal standing after the ranking procedure described in 4.3.4 will be prioritised according to the underrepresented gender among the returning researchers whose applications rank above the applications of equal standing;

    4.3.6. the applications which sustain equal standing after the ranking procedure described in 4.3.5 will be prioritised according to the underrepresented (sub-)field of research among the applications which rank above the applications of equal standing;

    4.3.7. the ranking of the applications which sustain equal standing after the ranking procedure described in 4.3.6 will be decided by lot in accordance with the conditions established by the Council.