

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

Guidelines for returning researcher grant applications 2022

Chapter 1

GENERAL PROVISIONS

1. Scope of Application

- 1.1. The guidelines establish the conditions and procedure for applying for returning researcher grant (hereinafter also *grant*), for evaluating and granting applications, and for allocating grants and reporting.
- 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 this directive.

2. Aim

The aim of the activity is to bring researchers, who have studied or worked in foreign countries and have acquired skills and knowledge for conducting research and development, back to Estonian research and development institutions and businesses.

3. Definitions

Returning researcher – a researcher who is a current/former Estonian resident or an Estonian citizen and has acquired research experience outside of Estonia (e.g. as a postdoctoral fellow, researcher at a research and development institution, etc) after obtaining his/her doctoral degree or equivalent qualification, and who conducts basic or applied research or development and implements an independent returning researcher project.

Returning researcher project (hereinafter also *project*) – the description of scientific research, which includes a clearly defined research problem and a specification of basic or applied research to be used for resolving the problem.

Return grant – a grant awarded to researchers coming to an Estonian research and development institution, undertaking or higher education institution for implementing a specific research and development project.

Host institution – an Estonian research and development institution, undertaking or higher education institution, which serves as the place of implementation of the returning researcher project and, upon award of the grant, enters into an employment contract with the returning researcher.

4. Applicants

- 4.1. A host institution can apply for the grant to be awarded to a person, who will implement the project, i.e. the returning researcher. The application must include a confirmation that the host institution will enter into an employment contract with the returning researcher for implementation of the returning researcher project.
- 4.2. The returning researcher has completed a postdoctoral fellowship or an equivalent level of research in a foreign country by the closing date of the call for applications.
- 4.3. The place of work of the returning researcher within the last two years must have been located outside of Estonia. The calculation of the period starts from 1 January of the year of application. In justified cases, the Evaluation Committee may propose to award the grant to a researcher who has worked abroad for a shorter period of time.
- 4.4. The returning researcher can simultaneously apply for one postdoctoral or returning researcher grant.
- 4.5. Preference is given to returning researchers who have previously received Estonian state funding in order to carry out a postdoctoral research project abroad.
- 4.6. The returning researcher, specified in the application, cannot be replaced during the application procedure and implementation of the project.
- 4.7. During the project, the returning researcher must work at the host institution on a full-time basis with a place of work in Estonia. The returning researcher, in agreement with the Council, does not have to be employed full-time at the host institution if he/she simultaneously works part-time for another employer in Estonia to achieve the objectives of the project (e.g., working simultaneously as a healthcare practitioner).
- 4.8. During the grant period, the returning researcher cannot be any of the following:
 - 4.8.1. the recipient of the postdoctoral grant awarded by the Council;
 - 4.8.2. the PI or the member of the (senior) research staff of a starting, team, or exploratory project.
- 4.9. The Council is entitled to prioritise research and development fields for each call for applications.

5. Host Institution

- 5.1. The host institution must provide information on other simultaneous applications, if any, submitted for funding the returning researcher project or any part thereof from several measures or other state budget, European Union, or foreign aid funds.
- 5.2. If the grant being applied for can be construed as state aid (the support will also be used for economic activity) or when applying for de minimis aid, the state aid form must be filled in. The applicant must describe under additional information on the relevant form whether it applies for the grant according to General Block Exemption Regulation or as de minimis aid. If the support is applied for according to the General Block Exemption Regulation, the funding rate of the project depends on the conditions set in Article 25 of the regulation. The applicant must describe whether basic or applied research will be carried out during the project.

- 5.3. The host institution will provide the returning researcher with the necessary working environment for implementing the project (incl. working space, administrative and support functions, etc).

6. Processing Return Grant Applications

- 6.1. The Council is responsible for processing grant applications.
- 6.2. The application process takes place in the Estonian Research Information System (hereinafter *ETIS*). The submission of the application and the communication with the applicant is conducted via ETIS. The decisions made during the stages of the application process, incl. the decision to grant or not to grant the application, will be announced via ETIS. The returning researcher is required to monitor the messages sent via ETIS regularly and keep the contact information up to date.

Chapter 2

CONDITIONS FOR APPLYING FOR A GRANT

7. Applying for a Return Grant

- 7.1. The period of the call for applications is established and announced by the Council.
- 7.2. The application is prepared by the host institution in cooperation with the returning researcher and it is then submitted to the Council via ETIS.
- 7.3. The application must be written in English.
- 7.4. The application specifies the following:
 - 7.4.1. the host institution;
 - 7.4.2. the returning researcher;
 - 7.4.3. the title of the project in Estonian and in English;
 - 7.4.4. a summary of the project in Estonian and in English;
 - 7.4.5. the requested grant period;
 - 7.4.6. the envisaged budget of the project in accordance with clause 8;
 - 7.4.7. the scientific background of the project, incl. the interdisciplinarity of the project (if applicable), previous research and development activities of the returning researcher and their links to the project;
 - 7.4.8. the main objectives of the project, research questions and/or (excl. justified exceptional cases) hypotheses, methods, and the work plan together with risk reduction measures and a back-up plan, incl. tentative annual work plans and the availability of the infrastructure necessary for achieving the objectives of the project;
 - 7.4.9. the expected results, their potential scientific impact, and possible directions for future research;
 - 7.4.10. an explanation about how the compliance with the principles of research ethics will be secured during the implementation of the project and a comment

on whether the project requires a licence from a specific ethics committee or the licence has already been obtained;

- 7.4.11. if the project necessitates compliance with the Nagoya Protocol, an explanation about which genetic resources will be used and whether the project requires the due diligence declaration or the due diligence declaration has already been submitted;
 - 7.4.12. an explanation about which data will be generated during the implementation of the project and how the data will be managed;
 - 7.4.13. a description of the returning researcher's research and development activities during the past ten years, indicating the importance of the publications, industrial property item(s) and projects linked to the application for the implementation of the proposed project, and the role of the returning researcher in these as well as the experience of supervising students;
 - 7.4.14. the three most noteworthy results, including the references to the relevant publications, of the previous projects carried out with the research or mobility funding awarded by the Council (if applicable);
 - 7.4.15. the estimated technology readiness level (hereinafter *TRL*) of the results of the project in accordance with the guidelines provided by the Council¹, and the potential societal impact of the results, incl. the potential applicability of the results and their importance for Estonian culture, society, and/or economy;
 - 7.4.16. an explanation about how the results of the project will be disseminated to the public;
 - 7.4.17. a confirmation that the principles of research ethics and good research practice will be adhered to during the conception and implementation of the project;
- 7.5. The Council is entitled to demand additional information and documents from the returning researcher and the host institution.

8. Budget of the Grant

- 8.1. The unit cost for experimental project is €60,480 per year (€5,040 per month) and for non-experimental project €57,120 per year (€4,760 per month). It is not possible to get the unit costs for a shorter period than one month.
- 8.2. The unit cost includes the salary fund, research expenses, and overhead expenses:
 - 8.2.1. the salary fund consists of the salary along with any and all state taxes, contributions, and compensations arising from law;
 - 8.2.2. research costs are travel costs, subcontracting costs, costs related to the (open access) publication and popularisation of the research and development results obtained during the implementation of the project, costs related to the protection of intellectual property, and other direct costs that are necessary for conducting research and stem from the characteristics of the project;

¹ <https://www.etag.ee/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Technology-readiness-levels.pdf>
<https://www.etag.ee/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Technology-readiness-levels-in-HU-and-SO-fields.pdf>

- 8.2.3. overhead costs are incurred by the host institution and are related to the management of the grant by the host institution.
- 8.3. The unit cost of the returning researcher's mobility allowance is €2,340 per year (€195 per month).
- 8.4. The mobility allowance is an allowance paid to the returning researcher by the host institution to cover the costs of relocation to Estonia. The unit cost includes any taxes applicable to allowances pursuant to Estonian legislation (no overhead is charged on the mobility allowance).

9. Grant Period

- 9.1. The minimum grant period is 12 months and the maximum period is 24 months.
- 9.2. Implementation of the returning researcher project must commence on 1 December 2022 at the latest. The grant period will commence on the date specified in the grant agreement.

Chapter 3

EVALUATION AND GRANTING OF APPLICATIONS

10. Checking the Technical Details of the Applications

- 10.1. The Council is responsible for checking the technical details of the applications.
- 10.2. When checking the technical details of the applications, it will be determined if the returning researcher, the application, and the host institution meet the necessary requirements.
- 10.3. The content of the applications will not be evaluated.
- 10.4. In case formal inaccuracies which can be corrected without changing the content of the application are present, the Council will set a deadline of up to ten working days for correcting the mistakes.
- 10.5. The Council is entitled to reject the application without processing it if:
- 10.5.1. the returning researcher, the application, or the host institution does not meet the requirements and it has been impossible to correct the inaccuracies stipulated in clause 10.4;
 - 10.5.2. the host institution and the returning researcher did not correct the inaccuracies within the time limit established by the Council;
 - 10.5.3. the host institution and the returning researcher have made changes in the application that are unrelated to the correction of formal inaccuracies specified by the Council.

11. Evaluation of Applications

- 11.1. The applications are evaluated on the basis of the evaluation guidelines for returning researcher grant applications (hereinafter *evaluation guidelines*) established by the Council.
- 11.2. The Council will set qualification thresholds in the evaluation guidelines for evaluating the applications. The application will not be granted if it does not pass the qualification threshold in at least one evaluation criterion.
- 11.3. After the technical details of the applications have been checked, the applications will be processed by the field-specific Expert Panels. Each application will be appointed an expert from among the members of the field-specific Expert Panel, who will be responsible for suggesting the reviewers and for compiling the combined evaluation. The Evaluation Committee is entitled to decide which Expert Panel will process which application.
- 11.4. Each application will receive a review by at least two independent reviewers.
- 11.5. The Expert Panel will submit the combined evaluations given to each application belonging to their field of expertise to the Evaluation Committee. Although non-binding, the Expert Panel will rely on the scores and their justifications given by the reviewers.
- 11.6. The Evaluation Committee is responsible for giving each application its final evaluation. Although non-binding, the Evaluation Committee will rely on the combined evaluations given by the Expert Panel when forming the scores and their justifications in the final evaluation.
- 11.7. Based on the final evaluations, the Evaluation Committee will compile a single ranking list for all applications. The compliant applications will be granted in the order of ranking until depletion of the funds allocated for grants in this call for applications. The applications of equal standing will be ranked by the Evaluation Committee according to the principles described in the evaluation guidelines.
- 11.8. In the final evaluation, the Evaluation Committee may prescribe certain conditions that the returning researcher and the host institution are required to fulfil upon receiving the grant.
- 11.9. The Council will make the reviews stipulated in clause 11.4, the final evaluation stipulated in clause 11.6, and the position of the application in the ranking list of returning researcher grant applications known to the returning researcher and to the host institution.
- 11.10. The returning researcher and the host institution are entitled to submit a written joint opinion and make objections regarding the reviews and the final evaluation within the time limit established by the Council (hearing). At the hearing, attention will primarily be paid to the assessment of the adherence to procedural rules and to the correction of possible factual errors. The scientific evaluation given by the reviewers or by the Evaluation Committee will not be re-evaluated. If the Evaluation Committee has prescribed certain conditions in the final evaluation that must be fulfilled in order to receive the grant, the returning researcher and the host institution must submit a consent to secure the compliance with these conditions.
- 11.11. The Council is entitled to reject the application if intentional false information, plagiarism, or fraudulent activities become evident.

12. Granting of Applications

- 12.1. Considering the final evaluation and the joint opinion received from the host institution and the returning researcher, the Evaluation Committee will submit a justified and impartial proposal to the Council:
 - 12.1.1. to grant the application in full;
 - 12.1.2. to grant the application in part;
 - 12.1.3. not to grant the application.
- 12.2. The Council has the right, subject to a reasoned decision, to send the proposal back to the Evaluation Committee for a repeat review.
- 12.3. The decision to grant the application in full or in part or not to grant the application is made by a directive of the Management of the Council.
- 12.4. The decision not to grant the application is made in the following cases:
 - 12.4.1. based on the evaluation results, the application does not exceed the qualification threshold in at least one of the criteria;
 - 12.4.2. the project cannot be supported due to the available budget for funding the applications;
 - 12.4.3. the host institution does not agree with the proposal to grant the application in part or with the conditions set.
- 12.5. If the returning researcher whose application was to be granted by the Council based on the proposal made by the Evaluation Committee, or who has been awarded the returning researcher grant by the Management of the Council waives the grant before the beginning of the new call, then the grant will be awarded to the next returning researcher in the ranking list.

Chapter 4

ALLOCATION OF GRANTS

13. Allocation of Grants

- 13.1. The Council will enter into a tripartite agreement (hereinafter *grant agreement*) with the host institution and the returning researcher. The grant agreement entails the rights, obligations, and responsibilities of the parties.
- 13.2. The grant is allocated to the host institution, which is obliged to enable the returning researcher to use the allocated grant for implementing the returning researcher project in accordance with the application.
- 13.3. The payment of the grant is subject to the terms and conditions specified in the tripartite grant agreement.
- 13.4. In case a grant is allocated, the host institution will enter into an employment contract with the returning researcher for implementing the project, if such a contractual relationship did not already exist before the allocation the grant, or amend the existing employment contract accordingly.

- 13.5. At the beginning of the project, a grant will be allocated to cover the costs of the first year of the project and at the beginning of the second year of the project, the remaining grant will be allocated.
- 13.6. During the first six months of the project, the returning researcher will submit the data management plan to the Council.

14. Changing the Host Institution

- 14.1. The returning researcher is entitled to change the host institution. In order to do that, the returning researcher and the current host institution will submit a request to the Council along with the consent of the new host institution.
- 14.2. The Evaluation Committee will evaluate the quality and sufficiency of the research environment of the new host institution as well as the infrastructure necessary for achieving the objectives of the project. In case of
- 14.2.1. approval, the Council will conclude a new grant agreement with the returning researcher and the new host institution, which must enter into an employment contract with the returning researcher within one month. The Council will terminate the grant agreement with the returning researcher and the previous host institution;
 - 14.2.2. disapproval, no new grant agreement will be concluded.
- 14.3. The new grant agreement will be concluded within three months at the latest. Until the new grant agreement is concluded, the Council will suspend the payments.
- 14.4. After the termination of the grant agreement, the previous host institution is required to refund the unused grant money along with a proportional fee of overhead expenses to the Council no later than seven calendar days upon receiving the corresponding claim for refund from the Council.

Chapter 5

TEMPORARY SUSPENSION AND TERMINATION OF A PROJECT

15. Temporary Suspension of a Returning Researcher Project

- 15.1. Temporary suspension of the project may be requested in case of returning researcher's pregnancy, maternity or parental leave, compulsory military service, serious illness, or other exceptional circumstances, which make it impossible or significantly more difficult to implement the project.
- 15.2. The project can be temporarily suspended on the basis of a reasoned joint application from the host institution and the returning researcher, which must be submitted to the Council. If necessary, a member of the Evaluation Committee will provide the Council with an assessment of the justification for the temporary suspension of the project.
- 15.3. The project can be temporarily suspended for up to three years. The end date of the project will be extended by the suspension period.

15.4. The grant agreement will be suspended for the temporary suspension period of the project.

16. Termination of a Returning Researcher Project

16.1. The project will end on the end date of the grant period.

16.2. All the activities financed with the grant must be carried out by the end date of the project.

17. Reporting

17.1. The host institution, in cooperation with the returning researcher, will prepare the final report of the project either in Estonian or in English and the host institution will submit it to the Council via ETIS within two months after the end date of the project.

17.2. The final report includes the following:

17.2.1. the results (incl. the main results of the project in the form of a popular science summary both in Estonian and in English, the full texts of the publications that have been published as a result of implementing the project and also contain a reference to the grant as well as the industrial property items) in accordance with the objectives set in the application. The publications that do not contain a reference to the grant in accordance with clause 18.1 must not be included in the final report;

17.2.2. the TRL of the results of the project;

17.2.3. the potential applicability as well as the scientific and societal impact of the results, incl. the importance for Estonian culture, society, and/or economy as well as possible directions for future research (if applicable);

17.2.4. public outreach activities;

17.2.5. if the project necessitated compliance with the Nagoya Protocol, the due diligence declaration;

17.2.6. additional information that the host institution and the returning researcher deem relevant;

17.2.7. a report on the usage of the grant.

17.3. In case of early termination of the project, the host institution, in cooperation with the returning researcher, is required to submit the final report of the project pursuant to clause 17.1.

17.4. In case the host institution is not able to prepare the final report in cooperation with the returning researcher, the final report will be prepared and submitted to the Council by the host institution alone.

17.5. On the basis of the final report, the Council will assess the implementation of the project and make the assessment available to the host institution and the returning researcher via ETIS.

18. Making the Results of the Returning Researcher Project Public

- 18.1. Upon the publication of the results of the project, a reference to the grant that was used for funding the project must be included.
- 18.2. The full texts of the publications that have been published as a result of implementing the project and also contain a reference to the grant will be made freely available by the host institution via ETIS, unless limited by publishing restrictions, copyright or intellectual property laws.
- 18.3. If a publishing house restricts access to the publications temporarily, the host institution will make the full texts of the publications published as a result of implementing the project freely available once the restriction has expired.
- 18.4. The main results of the project in the form of a popular science summary both in Estonian and in English will be made freely available by the Council.

Chapter 6

EARLY TERMINATION OF THE GRANT AGREEMENT AND RECLAMATION OF A GRANT

19. Early Termination of the Grant Agreement

- 19.1. The Council is entitled to revoke the decision of granting the application and to terminate the grant agreement if:
 - 19.1.1. the host institution or the returning researcher have submitted a respective request;
 - 19.1.2. the host institution or the returning researcher have fundamentally violated the requirements stipulated by the legislation or in these guidelines;
 - 19.1.3. the returning researcher is unable to implement the project (the death of the returning researcher, serious illness, transitioning to other employment, or other substantial and justified circumstances);
 - 19.1.4. the licence from a specific ethics committee has not been submitted prior to the beginning of human or animal experiments or it has become evident the due diligence declaration stemming from the Nagoya Protocol has been disregarded;
 - 19.1.5. the returning researcher has failed to submit the data management plan on time;
 - 19.1.6. the host institution or the returning researcher have intentionally presented false information, or plagiarism or fraudulent activities have become evident in the project-related activities;
 - 19.1.7. the Council will not be allocated funds from the state budget to cover the costs of the second year of the project;
 - 19.1.8. there are other substantial and justified circumstances.
- 19.2. Before revoking the decision to grant the application or before terminating the grant agreement, the Council will give the host institution and the returning researcher an opportunity to submit their position.

- 19.3. After the termination of the grant agreement, the host institution is required to refund the unused portion of the grant to the Council. The returning researcher and the host institution are required to submit the final report of the project pursuant to clause 17.
- 19.4. If the decision to grant the application is revoked retrospectively, the Council may reclaim the grant from the host institution.

20. Audit and Reclamation of a Grant

- 20.1. A grant not used for the intended purpose will be reclaimed by the Council from the host institution.
- 20.2. The host institution is required to allow the Council or a person authorised by the Council to audit the use of the grant and provide necessary assistance, incl. allowing access to the premises and the territory of the host institution and submitting all the requested documents for the purpose of verifying the correctness of the information provided.