

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

Guidelines for Evaluating Starting Grant Applications

1. Introduction

- 1.1. This directive establishes the evaluation criteria and the principles for evaluating and compiling the ranking lists of the applications submitted according to the “Conditions and Procedure for Starting Grants”.
- 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. 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 (sub-)field-specific ranking lists. The Expert Panel and the Evaluation Committee may use the overview of the bibliometric indicators of the applicant as an additional material for evaluating the applications.
- 2.4. The evaluation process is as follows:
 - 2.4.1. Processing the applications in the Expert Panel
 - 2.4.1.1. Each application will be reviewed by at least three independent experts, one of whom shall act as a rapporteur. At least two experts, incl. the rapporteur, have to be the members of the Expert Panel. In cooperation with and based on the evaluations given by the experts, the rapporteur will prepare the preliminary final evaluation for each application.
 - 2.4.1.2. The Expert Panel will confirm the preliminary final evaluation and the preliminary ranking list of the applications.
 - 2.4.1.3. During the hearing, the preliminary final evaluation will be made available to the applicant and to the institution. The names of the experts who have reviewed the application will not be disclosed to the applicant.
 - 2.4.2. Processing the applications in the Evaluation Committee
 - 2.4.2.1. The Evaluation Committee will consider the results of the hearing, approve the final evaluation of each application, confirm the ranking lists of the applications, make the funding proposals, and assign applications to the waiting list.
 - 2.4.2.2. The applications that have received the funding proposal and applications that have been assigned to the waiting list shall be forwarded to be evaluated by the Expert Panel on Research Ethics and Data Management. The Evaluation Committee will submit a proposal to the Management of the Council not to approve the rest of the applications.
 - 2.4.3. Processing the applications in the Panel on Research Ethics and Data Management

- 2.4.3.1. This Panel will give an evaluation on the criteria of research ethics and research data management.
- 2.4.3.2. During the evaluation process, the Panel is entitled to request explanations and additional information from the applicant.
- 2.4.3.3. The Panel may make suggestions or proposals for organising the activities of the project which are related to research ethics and/or data management more effectively, or submit a proposal to the Evaluation Committee to prescribe certain conditions that the PI and the institution are required to fulfil upon receiving the grant.

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 has to be based on the sub-criteria. It is also possible to add other noteworthy observations for each evaluation criterion.

Evaluation criterion	Sub-criteria	Rating scale
1. Scientific justification for the research project	In this criterion, the scientific justification for the research project, the originality and relevance of the idea, and the clarity of the objectives are to be evaluated, based on the following questions: 1.1. How good and how clear is the scientific justification? 1.2. How precisely are the research questions and/or (excl. justified exceptional cases) hypotheses, and the objectives of the project defined? 1.3. To what extent is the research idea original and relevant in the context of the research field?	From 1 to 5
2. Feasibility of the research project	In this criterion, the feasibility of the research project, the justification for the research plan and risk reduction measures, proposed methods, and resources are to be evaluated, based on the following questions: 2.1. How specifically and appropriately are the feasibility of the project explained and the necessary resources justified? 2.2. How suitable and appropriate are the proposed research methods? 2.3. How appropriate is the chosen field-specific approach in terms of the research questions (intradisciplinary, interdisciplinary, or crossdisciplinary, a combination between several disciplines, etc.)? 2.4. How reasonable and purpose-driven is the research plan? 2.5. How well are the potential scientific or methodological problem areas acknowledged and how well are the risk reduction measures and the back-up plan described?	From 1 to 5

<p>3. Competence of the applicant</p>	<p>In this criterion, the research activities of the applicant during the past 10 years (this period will be extended if the applicant has denoted a period of being away in the application since having obtained the doctoral degree, such as in case of pregnancy, maternity, or parental leave, compulsory military service, serious illness, or some other exceptional circumstance) are to be evaluated, based on the following questions:</p> <p>3.1. What are the merits and scientific expertise of the applicant, incl. participation in national and/or international research projects?</p> <p>3.2. How suitable are the scientific competences and the previous research experiences of the applicant (e.g., postdoctoral studies or equivalent research qualification) for carrying out the proposed project successfully?</p>	<p>From 1 to 5</p>
<p>4. Importance and potential impact of the research project</p>	<p>In this criterion, the importance and potential of the research project are to be evaluated, based on the following questions:</p> <p>4.1. How well and how sufficiently has the applicant 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 members of the research team, incl. doctoral students, international and intersectoral cooperation, etc.)?</p> <p>4.2. How specifically and appropriately is the scientific importance and the potential impact of the project described, considering the specifics of the research field and topic?</p> <p>4.3. To what extent is the application of the expected results of the project and the plan for doing that considered?</p> <p>4.4. How carefully are the dissemination activities of the research among the research community planned and considered in order to exchange (international) scientific knowledge necessary in the context of the project?</p> <p>4.5. How specifically and appropriately is the importance and the potential impact of the project outside academia for the development of the research field described, considering the specifics of the research field and topic, and the plan for applying the results of the project outside academia described?</p>	<p>From 1 to 5</p>

	<p>4.6. How important are the expected results of the project for culture, society, and/or economy (nationally and/or internationally)?</p> <p>4.7. How well are the plans for public outreach (dissemination of the results among the wider public outside academia) considered?</p>	
<p>5. Research ethics, incl. the potential ethical risks accompanying the implementation of the project</p> <p><i>This criterion will be evaluated only by the Panel on Research Ethics and Data Management</i></p>	<p>5.1. Has the applicant sufficiently, carefully, and properly assessed the potential ethical risks concerning research which may arise during research?</p> <p>5.2. Has the applicant sufficiently, carefully, and properly described the measures and activities with which the risks concerning research ethics are mitigated?</p> <p>5.3. Has the applicant sufficiently, carefully, and properly addressed the ethical and legal requirements applicable to the research (e.g., requirements related to the processing of personal data or ethics committee approvals) and how the requirements are to be met during the course of the project?</p>	Appropriate, conditionally appropriate
<p>6. Research data management</p> <p><i>This criterion will be evaluated only by the Panel on Research Ethics and Data Management</i></p>	<p>6.1. Has the applicant sufficiently, carefully, and properly described issues related to the management of research data and other research results throughout their life cycle?</p> <p>6.2. Has the applicant sufficiently, carefully, and properly addressed the ethical and legal requirements regarding the storage or use of research results and research data (e.g., issues related to open science or intellectual property), and explained the fulfilment of the requirements?</p>	Appropriate, conditionally appropriate

3.2. Rating scales and the formation of the final score

3.2.1. For criteria 1, 2, 3, and 4 a nine-point differentiated rating scale is used:

- 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. For criteria 5 and 6 a two-point differentiated rating scale is used:

- Appropriate;

- Conditionally appropriate.

3.2.3. Interpretation of ratings for criteria 1, 2, 3, and 4:

- 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. The application is competitive on an international scale.
- Outstanding (5) – the application is remarkably well elaborated and all sub-criteria of the evaluation criteria have been met at an excellent level. The application is competitive on an international scale. An exceptionally strong application in all respects. The score “outstanding” is exceptional and it will be necessary to provide an additional justification for this score.

3.2.4. Interpretation of ratings for criteria 5 and 6:

- Appropriate – there are no shortcomings; there are some shortcomings or issues to be considered; the Panel may make suggestions or proposals for organising the activities of the project which are related to research ethics and/or data management more effectively.
- Conditionally appropriate – there are significant shortcomings related to research ethics and/or data management and in order to ensure that the project will be implemented in compliance with the requirements of research ethics and/or data management, the Panel will prescribe certain conditions that the PI and the institution are required to fulfil upon receiving the grant.

3.2.5. The final score will be formed by summing up the scores given to the evaluation criteria. For criterion 4 (Importance and potential impact of the research project), the coefficient 0.8 is applied. The final score can range from 3.8 to 19 points.

3.3. Threshold

3.3.1. The qualification threshold for criteria 1, 2, 3, and 4 is 3 points (*good*) before applying the coefficient. If the application does not pass the qualification threshold, then it does not qualify for funding and limitations could be placed upon the applicant in the next call.

3.3.2. The application will not be approved if it receives less than 80% of the maximum possible final score, i.e., if the application receives less than 15.2 points.

4. Basis for the formation of the ranking list

- 4.1. The ranking lists of the applications will be formed in accordance with the Expert Panel which processed the applications. The applications which have not passed the qualification threshold or which have received less than 15.2 points as the final score will not be included in the ranking list.
- 4.2. The applications will be placed into the ranking list based on the final score given to each application. For ranking the applications with the same final score, the criteria to be used is as follows:
 - 4.2.1. 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, and 4;
 - 4.2.2. the applications which sustain equal standing after the ranking procedure described in 4.2.1 will be prioritised according to the underrepresented gender among the applicants whose applications rank above the applications of equal standing.
- 4.3. If the applications sustain equal standing after the ranking procedure described in 4.2.2, but it is necessary to compile a more exact ranking list for making the funding proposal, then the additional criteria to be used is as follows:
 - 4.3.1. the applications will be prioritised according to the underrepresented (sub-)field of research among the applications which rank above the applications of equal standing;
 - 4.3.2. the ranking of the applications which sustain equal standing after the ranking procedure described in 4.3.1 will be decided by lot in accordance with the conditions established by the Council.