

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 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. Ratings given to the applications are not compared with the ratings from previous calls.
- 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, are members of the Expert Panel. In cooperation with the experts and based on the evaluations given by them, the rapporteur will prepare the preliminary final evaluation for the application.
    - 2.4.1.2. The Expert Panel will confirm the preliminary final evaluation of each application and form the preliminary ranking list of applications.
    - 2.4.1.3. The preliminary final evaluation will be made available to the applicant and to the institution for the hearing. The names of the experts who have reviewed the application will not be disclosed.
  - 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 applications, make funding proposals, and assign applications to the waiting list.
    - 2.4.2.2. The applications that have received a 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 more efficient organising of the activities of the project which are related to research ethics and/or data management, 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
<b>1. Scientific justification for the research project</b>	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 innovative in the context of the research field?	From 1 to 5
<b>2. Feasibility of the research project</b>	In this criterion, the feasibility of the research project, the justification for the research plan and risk reduction measures, proposed methods, and resources (incl. inclusion of additional competences, if necessary) 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 carefully has the applicant thought through, planned, explained, and proven (if necessary (e.g. in case of cooperation that is new or crucial to the project)) the inclusion of external competences (e.g., from other disciplines, external experts, implementing bodies, and other stakeholders (if applicable)) and internal competences that are needed for achieving the objectives of the project?	From 1 to 5

	<p>2.3. How suitable and justified are the proposed research methods?</p> <p>2.4. How appropriate and justified is the chosen field-specific approach in terms of the research questions (intra-, inter-, or crossdisciplinary, a collaboration between several disciplines, etc.)?</p> <p>2.5. How reasonable and purpose-driven is the research plan?</p> <p>2.6. 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?</p>	
<p><b>3. Competence of the applicant</b></p>	<p>In this criterion, the applicant's research activity over the past 10 years* is 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 experience of the applicant (incl. research mobility after PhD) for carrying out the proposed project successfully?</p> <p><i>* This period will be extended if the applicant has denoted a period of being away in the application since having obtained the doctoral degree, for reasons such as maternity or parental leave, working with a workload of less than 0,5 during raising a child under the age of 3 years, compulsory military service, serious illness, or other exceptional circumstances.</i></p>	<p>From 1 to 5</p>
<p><b>4. Importance and potential impact of the research project</b></p>	<p>In this criterion, the importance and potential impact 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 <b>scientific</b> importance and the potential impact of the project described, considering the specifics of the research field and the topic?</p>	<p>From 1 to 5</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 activities related to the dissemination of research among the research community planned and considered to exchange (international) scientific knowledge that is relevant in the context of the project?</p> <p>4.5. How specifically and appropriately has the applicant described the project's importance and the potential impact <b>outside academia</b>, considering the specifics of the research field and the topic, and the plan for applying the results of the project outside academia?</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 considered (dissemination of the results among the wider public outside academia)?</p>	
<p>5. <b>Research ethics, incl. the potential ethical risks accompanying the implementation of the project</b></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 project?</p>	<p>Appropriate, conditionally appropriate</p>
<p>6. <b>Research data management</b></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>	<p>Appropriate, conditionally appropriate</p>

### 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. Interpretations of ratings by evaluation criteria are presented in section 5.

3.2.4. 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.

## **5. Interpretations of ratings**

5.1. Interpretation of ratings for criteria 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5:

*Interpretation of ratings in criterion "1. Scientific justification for the research project"*

### **Outstanding (5)**

The scientific justification of the application is remarkable and clear. The application addresses high level research questions/hypotheses that are excellently outlined and clear. The idea for the project is highly original and innovative. The objectives are very clearly described and justified. The application is competitive on an international scale. An exceptionally strong application in all respects. The score "outstanding" is exceptional and it is necessary to provide an additional justification for this score.

### **Very good (4)**

The scientific justification of the application is very good. The application addresses important research questions/hypotheses that are mostly well thought through and clear. The idea for the project is original and innovative. The objectives are clearly described and justified. Most of the important aspects are described very well and only a small number of shortcomings or issues to be considered are present. Minor revisions would be recommended. The application is competitive on an international scale.

### **Good (3)**

The scientific justification of the application is good. The application addresses necessary research questions/hypotheses. The idea for the project is original and the objectives are generally well described. Several important aspects would have needed a clearer and more detailed explanation. The application is proper but has a number of shortcomings.

### **Satisfactory (2)**

The scientific justification of the application remains general. The application addresses research questions/hypotheses that have some merit and the idea for the project is somewhat original. Objectives have been described but several shortcomings are present. The application has significant weaknesses, which would require significant changes and clarifications to be improved.

### **Unsatisfactory (1)**

The scientific justification of the application is very weak. The application lacks clearly established research questions/hypotheses. The proposed topic has already been researched a lot, there is no innovation. Objectives are incomplete and unclear. The scientific justification of the application is insufficient and/or has a number of weaknesses.

*Interpretation of ratings in criterion "2. Feasibility of the research project"*

**Outstanding (5)**

Feasibility of the research project is explained very appropriately and specifically. Necessary resources are very clearly justified and associated with the project. The proposed research methods are described excellently, they are original, timely and appropriate for achieving the objectives of the project. The chosen field-specific approach (intra-, inter- or crossdisciplinary, a collaboration between several disciplines, etc.) is the best possible approach. The inclusion of additional competences is thought through and planned in detail, explained comprehensively, and where necessary, proof of collaboration is provided. Research plan is very clearly described and suitable for achieving the objectives of the project. All the potential scientific or methodological problem areas are acknowledged comprehensively. Risk reduction measures and back-up plan are very well thought through. An exceptionally strong application in all respects. The score "outstanding" is exceptional and it is necessary to provide an additional justification for this score.

**Very good (4)**

Feasibility of the research project is explained appropriately. Necessary resources are clearly justified. The proposed research methods are described very well, they are original, timely and appropriate for achieving the objectives of the project. The chosen field-specific approach (intra-, inter- or crossdisciplinary, a collaboration between several disciplines, etc.) is very good and appropriate. The inclusion of additional competences is thought through and planned very well, explained very well, and where necessary, proof of collaboration is provided. Research plan is clear and suitable for achieving the objectives of the project. Potential scientific or methodological problem areas are acknowledged very well. Risk reduction measures and back-up plan are thought through. Only a small number of shortcomings or issues are present in the aspects of the feasibility of the project. Minor revisions would be recommended.

**Good (3)**

The research project is feasible. Necessary resources are justified. The proposed research methods are appropriate and justified. The chosen field-specific approach (intra-, inter- or crossdisciplinary, a collaboration between several disciplines, etc.) is good and generally appropriate. The inclusion of additional competences is thought through and planned in general, but not explained in detail and/or no proof of collaboration is provided. Most of the potential scientific, methodological and other problem areas are acknowledged. Research plan and risk reduction measures are described but need more detailed explanations. Most of the important aspects related to feasibility are addressed well, but there are some shortcomings present. Several important aspects would have needed a clearer and more detailed explanation.

**Satisfactory (2)**

The research project is generally feasible. Necessary resources have not been explained sufficiently. The proposed research methods are somewhat explained and justified but need revision. The chosen field-specific approach (intra-, inter- or crossdisciplinary, a collaboration between several disciplines, etc.) is not entirely suitable, there are shortcomings present. The inclusion of additional competences is not sufficiently thought through, planned, nor explained, and/or no proof of collaboration is provided. Research plan has been described but it is partly insufficient and not fully applicable. The potential scientific, methodological and other problem areas are not acknowledged sufficiently. The description of risk reduction measures remains general. Most of the aspects related to feasibility are addressed very

generally and there are significant shortcomings present, which would require significant changes and clarifications to be improved.

#### **Unsatisfactory (1)**

The research project is not entirely feasible. Necessary resources have not been sufficiently explained nor justified. The proposed research methods are not suitable for achieving the objectives. Field-specific approach is insufficient or not described. The inclusion of additional competences has not been thought through, not sufficiently planned nor explained, and/or no proof of collaboration is provided. The potential scientific, methodological and other problem areas have not been acknowledged. Research plan and risk reduction measures have not been thought through, there are significant shortcomings present. The aspects related to the feasibility of the project are addressed insufficiently and/or have several shortcomings.

*Interpretation of ratings in criterion "3. Competence of the applicant"*

#### **Outstanding (5)**

The research activities of the applicant during the past 10 years are on an excellent level, he/she has led or participated in (international) high-level research projects and published (internationally) important publications/monographs that are of outstanding quality. The applicant's previous research experience, including research mobility after obtaining a doctoral degree, exhibits outstanding ability to successfully implement the proposed project. The applicant also has other significant academic achievements. An exceptionally strong applicant. The score "outstanding" is exceptional and it is necessary to provide an additional justification for this score.

#### **Very good (4)**

The research activities of the applicant during the past 10 years are on a very good level, he/she participated in (international) high-level research projects and/or published (internationally) useful publications/monographs that are of very good quality. The applicant's previous research experience, including research mobility after obtaining a doctoral degree, exhibits very good ability to successfully implement the proposed project. The applicant has other very good academic achievements. A strong applicant.

#### **Good (3)**

The research activities of the applicant during the past 10 years are on a good level, they include, for example, participation in research projects and publication of (internationally) useful publications/monographs that are of good quality. The applicant's previous research experience, including research mobility after obtaining a doctoral degree, exhibits good ability to successfully implement the proposed project. The applicant has other academic achievements. A good applicant.

#### **Satisfactory (2)**

The research activity of the applicant during the past 10 years is satisfactory, yet it has significant shortcomings, e.g. modest rate in both publishing and participation in research projects. The applicant's previous research experience, including research mobility after obtaining a doctoral degree, exhibits little ability to successfully implement the proposed project.



**Unsatisfactory (1)**

The applicant does not have sufficient potential to successfully lead the proposed project. The research activity of the applicant during the past 10 years is insufficient. The applicant's previous research experience, including research mobility after obtaining a doctoral degree, does not exhibit ability to successfully implement the proposed project.

*Interpretation of ratings in criterion "4. Importance and potential impact of the research project"*

**Outstanding (5)**

The applicant has excellently planned and clearly described the activities of the project to support the development of his/her future research career and team leading competence. The scientific importance of the proposed research project is relevant, and it is described excellently and very clearly. The application of the expected results of the project, the plan for doing that, and the activities related to exchange of knowledge are extremely well thought through and outstanding. The importance of the project outside academia is described excellently and the plan for applying the results of the project outside academia is exceptionally well thought through. Activities related to the dissemination of research are exceptionally well thought through and planned. The potential impact of the proposed project is wide and significant both nationally and internationally. The score "outstanding" is exceptional and it is necessary to provide an additional justification for this score.

**Very good (4)**

The applicant has planned very well and clearly described the activities of the project to support the development of his/her future research career and team leading competence. The scientific importance of the proposed research project is justified very well and clearly. The application of the expected results of the project, the plan for doing that, and activities related to exchange of knowledge are explained very well. The importance of the project outside academia is described very well and the plan for applying the results of the project outside academia is clear. Activities related to the dissemination of research are very well thought through and planned. The potential impact of the proposed project is considerable both nationally and internationally.

**Good (3)**

The applicant has planned well and described the activities of the project to support the development of his/her future research career and team leading competence. The scientific importance of the proposed research project is explained generically. The application of the expected results of the project, the plan for doing that, and activities related to exchange of knowledge are not always very clear. The importance of the project outside academia is described well, the plan for applying the results of the project outside academia is somewhat insufficient. Activities related to the dissemination of research are sometimes not clearly outlined. The proposed project could have potential impact.

**Satisfactory (2)**

The applicant has somewhat planned and very generally described the activities of the project to support the development of his/her future research career and team leading competence. The scientific importance of the proposed research project is explained vaguely. The application of the expected results of the project, the plan for doing that and/or activities related to exchange of knowledge are somewhat insufficient. The importance of the project outside academia is vague and the plan for

applying the results of the project outside academia has significant shortcomings. Activities related to the dissemination of research are described vaguely. The proposed project could be seen to have some potential impact.

### **Unsatisfactory (1)**

The applicant has not planned the activities of the project that would support the development of his/her future research career and team leading competence, or the activities have been explained insufficiently. The importance of the proposed research project is explained vaguely. The application of the expected results of the project, the plan for doing that and/or activities related to exchange of knowledge are insufficient. The importance of the project outside academia is vague and not apparent and the plan for applying the results of the project outside academia is weak. Activities related to the dissemination of research are not described sufficiently and there are several shortcomings present. The proposed project has practically no potential impact.

*5.2. Interpretation of ratings in criteria "6. Research ethics, incl. the potential ethical risks accompanying the implementation of the project" and "7. Research data management":*

- 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.