

Personaalse uurimistoetuse taotluse hindamisjuhend

Guidelines for evaluating personal research funding applications

I Introduction

Grants awarded by the Estonian Research Council are made on the basis of this single set of core terms and conditions.

II Relevant terms

- 1) **Personal research funding** is a contribution to the costs of high-level research and development (R & D) activities carried out by researchers or small research groups who are employed by a research and development institution. Personal research funding comprises two categories of grants: exploratory research grants and start-up research grants.
- 2) An **exploratory research grant** is a grant to support individual high-risk or innovative research projects at a high international level.
- 3) A **start-up research grant** is a grant to support researchers who wish to establish a small, independent research group at an R & D institution.
- 4) A **research project** is a description of a study with a clearly defined and justified research problem/topic and methodology to address the problem/topic.
- 5) A **Principal Investigator** is a researcher who can apply for a personal research grant upon receiving consent from a host institution. The consent must also include confirmation that the host institution will enter into a contract of employment with the Principal Investigator if such a contractual relationship does not already exist at the time of submitting the application.

III Criteria for applying

Principal Investigator of an exploratory research grant:

A Principal Investigator is a person who:

- 1) has been awarded a doctorate in Estonia or who has foreign qualifications equal thereto; and
- 2) at the time of implementing the research project, is employed full-time at the host R & D institution.

A Principal Investigator who is employed only part-time at an R & D institution can be considered by the evaluation committee if this does not jeopardize the successful realization of the research project.

Principal Investigator of a start-up research grant:

A Principal Investigator is a person who:

- 1) has been awarded a first doctorate in Estonia or has equivalent foreign qualification elsewhere no more than 7 years prior to the year of applying for the grant. *The evaluation committee may, where justified, consider a person who has been awarded their first doctorate in Estonia or who has had an equivalent foreign qualification awarded more than 7 years prior to the year of applying for the grant as having met the criteria. In that case, the maximum time elapsed since the award of the first PhD can be extended, but only in certain properly documented circumstances, e.g., maternity leave or leave for national service, etc..*
- 2) is fully employed at the host institution during the realization of the project.

Application

The application for funding for a research project (hereinafter *application*) shall specify the following:

- 1) the Principal Investigator and other research staff;
- 2) the title of the research project;
- 3) a project summary;
- 4) the period to be financed;
- 5) the general theoretical background to the planned research project and its link to previous research carried out by the Principal Investigator or other research staff;
- 6) the main objectives of the research project, hypotheses, description of methods, and the annual research plans (including an explanation of how ethics requirements will be adhered to in the case of animal and/or human experiments);
- 7) expected results, their potential applicability, as well as possible future research directions;
- 8) a description of previous research and development activities and the track record of the Principal Investigator;
- 9) information on Estonian and international joint projects in which the Principal Investigator has been involved;
- 10) a description of the infrastructure and research environment at the host institution;
- 11) the budget for the research project.

IV Criteria for evaluation and rating scales

The purpose of personal research funding is to ensure the financing of high-level research and development projects. Personal research funding applications shall be evaluated by the evaluation committee of the Estonian Research Council based on the opinions of the individual reviewers and expert panels. The following evaluation criteria will be considered:

- 1) justification of the research project and description of expected results, taking into account the specifics of the research field and their applicability;

- 2) the qualifications and track record of the Principal Investigator (in the case of start-up research grants, also whether the Principal Investigator has been a post-doctoral fellow);
- 3) the quality of the infrastructure and research environment available for carrying out the research project at the host institution; and
- 4) justification for the proposed budget (including the share of subcontracting).

All criteria are evaluated along the following rating scale: 1 – unsatisfactory; 2 – satisfactory; 3 – good; 4 – very good; 5 – outstanding. Intermediate ratings, e.g. 1.5; 2.5; 3.5 and 4.5, may also be used.

The values for criteria in the drop-down menu are as follows:

- Outstanding;
- Very good – Outstanding;
- Very good;
- Good – Very good;
- Good;
- Satisfactory – Good;
- Satisfactory;
- Unsatisfactory – Satisfactory;
- Unsatisfactory.

The values for sub-criteria in the drop-down menu are as follows:

- Yes;
- No;
- Partially;
- Not applicable.

When evaluating applications, reviewers should take into account the following guidelines.

V Evaluation criteria to be used for reviewing personal research funding applications

Please make comments for all criteria.

1. Justification for the project, taking into account the specifics of the research field and applicability

1.1. Is the proposal well justified and clearly outlined and does it contain well-defined hypotheses and research questions?

1.2 Is the proposal characterized by a conceptually and/or methodologically innovative approach and is it well linked with the previous studies of the Principal Investigator?

1.3. Is the research plan clear and appropriate for its stated purpose and the elaboration of tasks justified and appropriate?

1.4. Are the proposed methods adequate and up-to-date and do they correspond to international standards?

1.5. Have the ethical requirements for human and animal studies been met, if applicable?

1.6. Does the proposed research topic have high potential for the achievement of a breakthrough at the international level?

Other comments on Section 1.

Overall quality of justification of the proposal.

2. Track record of the Principal Investigator

2.1. Is the Principal Investigator an internationally recognised researcher who has had their research from the last 10 years widely acknowledged (in terms of the quality and number of publications, number of citations, h-index, as the top-cited researcher in the corresponding research field, etc.)?

2.2. Has the Principal Investigator been successful in obtaining additional funding (grants, sponsored research, etc.)?

2.3. What is the Principal Investigator's experience in the management of (international) research projects and grants and in participation in international collaborative projects?

2.4. In the case of start-up grant applications, has the Principal Investigator been a post-doctoral fellow? Does this have a positive / neutral / negative impact on the present research project?

Other comments on Section 2.

Overall competence and expertise of the Principal Investigator and other research staff (in the case of start-up grants).

3. Quality of the infrastructure and research environment

3.1. Is the infrastructure and research environment at the host institution appropriate for the proposed research?

Other comments on Section 3.

Overall assessment of the quality of research environment.

4. Justification of the budget

This section will be evaluated by the local experts and the expert panel and is not to be completed by international reviewers.

4.1. Is the budget appropriate for the planned research?

4.2. Is the share of subcontracting justified?

Other comments on Section 4.

Overall assessment of the justification for accommodating other R & D resources in the budget.

Overall assessment of the application

Overall comments on the application.

Overall assessment of the application:

5 – Excellent (among the top 10%).

4 – Very good (among the top 25%).

VI Rating scales to be used in the review

The evaluation committee makes use of a 9-point rating scale in evaluating applications (outstanding, very good, good, satisfactory, and unsatisfactory, as well as their intermediaries: very good-outstanding, good-very good, satisfactory-good, and unsatisfactory-satisfactory). The corresponding numerical levels are 5, 4.5, 4, 3.5, 3, 2.5, 2, 1.5, and 1.

We ask evaluators to bear in mind that, ideally, no more than 10% of all proposals should be rated as “excellent”, and no more than 25% as “very good”.

The rating scales correspond to the following substantial assessments.

Outstanding. Top international research project

1. Justification for the project, taking into account the specifics of the research field and applicability

The application addresses crucial/cutting-edge research questions or knowledge gap.

The research ideas are highly original and innovative at the international level; includes novel methodology and design.

The task/topic is clear and justified and clearly supports the achievement of the overall goal.

The prospective results will make a substantial contribution to the development of science, technology, and/or society, and have potential for broad socioeconomic impact.

Ethical issues are fully considered.

2. Leadership

In the case of exploratory research grant applications:

Excellent leadership (track record, research environment, and collaborators).

The applicant is among the leaders in their field. Publications and/or monographs are at an outstanding international level. Articles are published in the best peer-reviewed journals or proceedings indexed in the leading databases in the field. Monographs are published by internationally acknowledged publishers.

The impact of the applicant (number of citations; impact factor of the journals where articles are published) is at an outstanding international level in the respective field.

In the case of start-up grant applications:

Very good leadership (track record, research environment, and collaborators).

The applicant is in the top of their field. Publications and/or monographs are at a good international level. Articles are published in respectable peer-reviewed journals or proceedings indexed in the leading databases of the field. Monographs are published by internationally acknowledged publishers. The impact of the applicant (number of citations; impact factor of the journals where articles are published) is, at a good international level in the respective field.

3. Quality of the infrastructure and research environment

The physical infrastructure and research environment fully meet the research requirements.

4. Justification of the budget

Potential for significant return on investment (resources requested, likelihood of project delivery, anticipated knowledge generation).

Appropriate time and other resources allocated to deliver project goals.

Very good. Internationally competitive and leading edge nationally

1. Justification for the project, taking into account the specifics of the research field and applicability

The application addresses an important research question or knowledge gap.

The research ideas are original and innovative at an international level; includes novel methodology and design.

The task/topic is clear and justified and supports the achievement of the overall goal.

The prospective results will make considerable contribution to the development of science, technology, and/or society and have potential for high socioeconomic impact.

Ethical issues are fully considered.

2. Track record of the Principal Investigator

In the case of exploratory research grant applications:

Very good leadership (track record, research environment, and collaborators).

The applicant is in the top of their field. Publications and/or monographs are at a good international level. Articles are published in respectable peer-reviewed journals or proceedings indexed in the leading databases of the field. Monographs are published by internationally acknowledged publishers. The impact of the applicant (number of citations; impact factor of the journals where articles are published) is at a good international level in the respective field.

In the case of start-up grant applications:

Strong leadership (track record, research environment, and collaborators).

The applicant is known in their field. Articles are published in peer-reviewed journals or international proceedings. Monographs are published by acknowledged publishers. The impact of the applicant (number of citations; the level of the journals where articles are published) is at a satisfactory international level in the respective field.

3. Quality of the infrastructure and research environment

The physical infrastructure and research environment meet the research requirements.

4. Justification of the budget

Potential for high return on investment (resources requested, likelihood of project delivery, anticipated knowledge generation).

Appropriate time and other resources allocated to deliver project goals (there may be scope to strengthen management of the project).

Good. Partially internationally competitive

1. Justification for the project, taking into account the specifics of the research field and applicability

The application addresses a worthwhile research question or knowledge gap.

Original and innovative at the national level; a methodologically sound study.

The task/topic is well presented. The overall goals can be achieved but certain improvements and adjustments are necessary.

The research ideas are of interest to science, and/or have a potential impact on the development of the economy and society.

Ethical issues are well considered.

2. Track record of the Principal Investigator

In the case of exploratory research grant applications:

Strong leadership (track record, research environment, and collaborators).

The applicant is known in their field. Articles are published in peer-reviewed journals or international proceedings. Monographs are published by acknowledged publishers. The impact of the applicant (number of citations; the level of the journals where articles are published) is at a satisfactory international level in the respective field.

In the case of start-up grant applications:

Average leadership (track record, research environment, and collaborators).

The applicant is somewhat known in their field. Some articles are published in peer-reviewed journals or international proceedings. Monographs are published by local publishers. The impact of the applicant (number of citations; the level of the journals where articles are published) is at a low international level in the respective field.

3. Quality of the infrastructure and research environment

Physical infrastructure and research environment meets the research requirements.

4. Justification of the budget

Potential for some return on investment (resources requested, likelihood of project delivery, anticipated knowledge generation).

Generally appropriate time and other resources allocated to deliver project goals (there maybe scope to strengthen the management of the project).

Satisfactory

1. Justification for the project, taking into account the specifics of the research field and applicability

The application addresses a worthwhile research question with potentially useful outcomes.

Somewhat original and innovative at the national level. A methodologically sound study but some areas require revision.

Likelihood of successful delivery, but additional clarifications and adjustments are required. It is not clear whether the proposed approach supports the achievement of the overall goal.

Certain, but not all, tasks can be implemented. There are some doubts about the feasibility of the proposal.

Ethical issues are adequately considered.

2. Track record of the Principal Investigator

In the case of exploratory research grant applications:

Appropriate leadership (there is scope to strengthen the team, research environment, and collaborators).

The applicant and the research team are not well known. Articles are published in journals and proceedings which are not indexed in the leading databases in the field. No monographs have been published. The impact of the applicant (number of citations; the level of the journals where articles are published) does not reach an international level.

In the case of start-up research grant applications:

Low leadership (there is scope to strengthen the team, research environment, and collaborators).

The applicant and the research team are not well known. Articles are published in journals and proceedings which are not indexed in the leading databases in the field. No monographs have been published. The impact of the applicant (number of citations; the level of the journals where articles are published) does not reach an international level.

3. Quality of the infrastructure and research environment

Physical infrastructure and research environment only partly meets the research needs. There is a need for substantial improvement.

4. Justification of the budget

Potentially more limited return on investment (resources requested, likelihood of project delivery, and anticipated knowledge generation).

Resources broadly appropriate to deliver the proposal.

Unsatisfactory

1. Justification of the project Justification for the project, taking into account the specifics of the research field and applicability

Poorly defined research topic, lack of research questions, likely to be of poor empirical value.

Methodologically weak or deficient.

Limited likelihood of new knowledge generation.

The proposed topic has been exhaustively studied by previous research. The prospective results have no empirical significance.

Ethical issues are not adequately considered.

2. Track record of the Principal Investigator

In the case of exploratory research grant applications:

Poor leadership.

The applicant's research and publishing record are weak. The impact of the applicant (number of citations; the level of the journals where articles are published) is poor.

There is insufficient potential for successfully running the established research plan. The competencies of the Principal Investigator do not support the achievement of the established objectives.

In the case of exploratory research grant applications:

Poor or no leadership.

The applicant's research and publishing record are very weak. The impact of the applicant (number of citations; the level of the journals where articles are published) is poor.

There is insufficient potential for successfully running the established research plan. The competencies of the Principal Investigator do not support the achievement of the established objectives.

3. Quality of the infrastructure and research environment

Physical infrastructure and research environment are poor and do not support the achievement of the established objectives.

4. Justification of the budget

Potentially poor return on investment and other resource allocation.