

Personaalse uurimistoetuse otsingutoetuse ja starditoetuse taotluste hindamisjuhend
Guidelines for evaluating personal research funding applications for exploratory research grants
and start-up research grants

I Introduction

The award of personal research funding for exploratory and start-up research grants has been stipulated in the „Conditions of and Procedure for Application for Exploratory and Start-Up Research Grant“.

These „Guidelines for evaluating exploratory and start-up research grants“ is a document which specifies the evaluation criteria set forth in the „Conditions of and Procedure for Application for Exploratory and Start-Up Research Grant“.

The purpose of personal research funding for exploratory research grants and start-up research grants is to ensure the financing of high-level research projects.

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 research groups who are employed by an R&D institution. The funding is provided for carrying out an independent research project as specified in the Organisation of Research and Development Act (§ 2 clause 8) and is not meant to be used for co-funding other research activities. Personal research funding comprises three categories of grants: exploratory research grants, start-up research grants, and postdoctoral research grants.
 - An **exploratory research grant** is a grant to support innovative, ground-breaking, high-risk research projects at a high international level.
 - A **start-up research grant** is a grant to support promising young researchers to start an independent research career, and establish their own research team.
- 2) A **postdoctoral research grant** (regulated by the Annex No 3 to the Decree No 1.1-4/16/62 from March 23, 2016 of the Management Board of Estonian Research Council).
- 3) A **research project is** a description of research activities with a clearly defined and justified research problem/topic and the methodology to address the problem/topic.
- 4) A **Principal Investigator** is a researcher who applies for an exploratory research grant or a start-up research grant for a personal research project and has received 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

1. Principal Investigator of an exploratory research grant

A Principal Investigator of an exploratory research grant is a person who:

- 1) has been awarded a doctorate or who has 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 least half-time) at an R&D institution can be considered eligible by the Evaluation Committee if this does not jeopardize the successful realization of the research project.

2. Principal Investigator of a start-up research grant

A Principal Investigator of a start-up research grant is a person who:

- 1) has been awarded his/her first doctorate or an equivalent qualification no less than 2 and no more than 7 years prior to the closing date of the call. The date of awarding the doctorate or equivalent qualification is the date indicated in the respective document issued by the awarding institution. The evaluation committee may, where justified, consider eligible a person who has been awarded his/her first doctorate or equivalent qualification more than 7 years prior to the closing date of the call. In that case, the maximum effective time elapsed since the award of the first doctorate can be reduced, but only in certain properly documented circumstances, e.g., parental leave, national service;
- 2) has completed postdoctoral studies (preferably outside of Estonia) after receiving his/her doctorate or equivalent qualification. The evaluation committee may, where justified, consider eligible a person who has not completed postdoctoral studies but who has acquired comparable research experience (preferably in a foreign country);
- 3) is fully employed at the host institution during the realization of the project.

3. Application

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

- 1) the Principal Investigator and other research staff;
- 2) the title of the research project;
- 3) a project summary;
- 4) the requested project period;
- 5) the general theoretical background to the research project and its link to previous research carried out by the Principal Investigator or other research staff; if the research project is not linked to their previous research and its results, an explanation why a new research direction is chosen;
- 6) the main objectives of the research project, hypotheses, description of methods, and the annual research plans;
- 7) information on considerations how ethical issues involved in the proposed research will be followed. The applicants are required to consider the ethical risk of any procedure within a research project which involves human participation or personal data, including a description of how the principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity of subjects will be followed, and a statement on how such data will be stored and protected. Use of research methods that

require review or approval from a human ethics or a bioethics research committee, should be also clearly indicated in the application. If the corresponding approvals are obtained by the application deadline, applicants are asked to attach them to the application.

- 8) expected results and their potential applicability, as well as possible future research directions;
- 9) a description of previous research and development activities in the last 10 years and the track record of the Principal Investigator in particular, indicating the Principal Investigator's personal contribution to the publications linked to the application (or of a selection from thereof);
- 10) information on Estonian and international cooperation (incl. projects) in which the Principal Investigator has participated in the last 10 years;
- 11) a description of the quality and adequacy of the infrastructure and research environment at the host institution for achieving the objectives of the research project, and
- 12) the budget for the research project.

The research project should be described in max. 15,000 characters (including the general theoretical background of the research project and its link to previous research and its results; justification of the research project; the main objectives of the research project, hypotheses, description of methods, and the annual research plans; consideration of ethical issues involved in the proposed research; expected results and their potential impact, possible future research directions, description of the previous research and development activities and the track record of the Principal Investigator).

IV Evaluation

Personal research funding applications shall be evaluated by the Evaluation Committee of the Estonian Research Council based on the well-reasoned opinions of the individual reviewers and expert panels. The following evaluation criteria will be considered:

- 1) justification for the research project and description of expected results, taking into account the specifics of the research field and their applicability;
- 2) the qualification and track record of the Principal Investigator;
- 3) the quality and adequacy of the infrastructure and research environment available for carrying out the research project at the host institution;
- 4) justification for the proposed budget (including the share of subcontracting).

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

V Evaluation criteria to be used for reviewing exploratory research grants and start-up research grants for 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 application characterized by a conceptually innovative approach?
- 1.2. Is the application well-justified and clearly outlined and does it contain well-defined hypotheses and research questions?
- 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, up-to-date and/or innovative?
- 1.5. Are there any ethical issues involved in the proposed research and if so, have they been adequately considered and addressed in the application?

Other comments on Section 1.

Overall quality of justification.

2. Track record of the Principal Investigator

In the case of exploratory research grant applications:

- 2.1. Is the Principal Investigator an internationally recognised researcher who has had his/her research from the last 10 years widely acknowledged (in terms of the quality of publications, number of citations, etc.) and do the competencies of the Principal Investigator support the achievement of the proposed objectives?
- 2.2. Has the Principal Investigator been successful in obtaining additional funding (grants, sponsored research, etc.) in the last 10 years?
- 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 in the last 10 years?

In the case of start-up grant applications:

- 2.1. Is the Principal Investigator at a good international level in his/her respective field (in terms of the quality and number of publications, etc.) and do the competencies of the Principal Investigator support the achievement of the proposed objectives?
- 2.2. Has the Principal Investigator been a postdoctoral fellow or has gained similar research experience?
- 2.3. What is the Principal Investigator's experience in participation in international collaborative projects?

Other comments on Section 2.

Overall competence and expertise of the Principal Investigator.

3. Quality and adequacy of the infrastructure and research environment

This section will be evaluated only by the expert panel and the Evaluation Committee not by external reviewers.

Based on this information, the expert panel and the Evaluation Committee should provide answers and comments to the following question:

- 3.1. Is the infrastructure and research environment at the host institution appropriate for achieving the objectives of the proposed research project?

Other comments on Section 3.

Overall assessment of the quality and adequacy of research environment.

4. Justification of the budget

This section will be evaluated only by the Evaluation Committee, and not scored.

The evaluators should answer and comment on the following:

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 application

This section will be filled in by the expert panel and the Evaluation Committee.

Overall comments on the application.

VI Rating scales to be used in the review

Rating scales

A five-point rating scale is used in evaluating sections 1 and 2 of the application (outstanding, very good, good, satisfactory, or unsatisfactory). The evaluation is provided to a level of precision of 0.5 points, i.e. intermediate values like very good – outstanding, good – very good, etc. can be used.

A two-point rating scale (meets the needs, does not meet the needs) is used in evaluating section 3 of the application.

The numeric for evaluating sections 1 and 2 values in the drop-down menu are as follows:

- Outstanding (5);
- Very good (4);
- Good (3);
- Satisfactory (2);
- Unsatisfactory (1),

and for evaluating section 3 are as follows:

- Meets the needs (2);
- Does not meet the needs (1).

The final score can range from 3 to 12 points.

Threshold

Research projects which receive less than three points for sections 1 or 2 and less than two points for section 3 do not qualify for funding.

The rating scales correspond to the following descriptions:

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

Outstanding

The research ideas are highly original and innovative. An internationally competitive research project.

The application addresses crucial/cutting-edge research questions or knowledge gap, and/or has a significant impact on the development of the economy and society. The objectives are very clearly articulated and justified. The hypotheses and research questions are very well elaborated.

The research plan is clearly described and relevant for achieving the objectives. The tasks are very well justified and appropriate.

The application includes original methodology and/or design. The methods are very clearly described, up-to-date, very well-articulated and highly relevant for achieving the objectives.

Ethical issues are fully considered.

Very good

The research ideas are original and innovative, internationally competitive and cutting-edge nationally.

The project addresses an important research question or knowledge gap, and/or has a considerable impact on the development of the economy and society. The objectives are clearly articulated and justified. The hypotheses and research questions are mostly well elaborated.

The research plan is clearly described and relevant for achieving the objectives. The tasks are clearly justified and appropriate.

The application includes original methodology and design. The methods are clearly described, up-to-date, well-articulated and relevant for achieving the objectives.

Ethical issues are very well considered.

Good

The research ideas are original and partially internationally competitive.

The application addresses a worthwhile research question or knowledge gap, and/or has a potential impact on the development of the economy and society. The hypotheses and research objectives need some additional elaboration.

The research plan needs some clarification. The tasks can be implemented but certain improvements and adjustments are necessary.

A methodologically sound study. The methods are articulated and justified, up-to-date and/or innovative to some extent.

Ethical issues are well-considered.

Satisfactory

The research ideas are somewhat original and innovative at the national level.

The application addresses a research question or knowledge gap, and/or societal impact with some added value. Justification needs additional clarifications and adjustments. The hypotheses and research questions need major additional elaboration.

The research plan needs some revision. Certain, but not all, tasks can be implemented.

A methodologically sound study but some areas require revision. The methods are somewhat articulated and justified, not very up-to-date and/or innovative.

Ethical issues are adequately considered.

Unsatisfactory

The proposed topic has been exhaustively studied. Limited likelihood of new knowledge generation.

A poorly defined research topic, lack of clear hypotheses and research questions.

The research plan and elaboration of tasks need profound revision.

The methods are inadequate for achieving the overall goal, not up-to-date nor innovative.

Ethical issues are not adequately considered.

2. Track record of the Principal Investigator

In the case of exploratory research grant applications:

Outstanding

The applicant is among the leaders in his/her 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.

The applicant shows impressive leadership abilities and skills. He/she has a lot of experience in the management of (international) research projects and grants and very good experience in participation in international collaborative projects.

The applicant has been very successful in obtaining additional funding (grants, sponsored research, etc.).

Very good

The applicant is renowned in his/her field. Publications and/or monographs are at a very 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 very good international level in the respective field.

The applicant shows very good leadership abilities and skills. He/she has considerable experience in the management of (international) research projects and grants and in participation in international collaborative projects.

The applicant has been successful in obtaining additional funding (grants, sponsored research, etc.).

Good

The applicant is well-known in his/her 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 good international level in the respective field.

The applicant shows leadership abilities and skills. He/she has some experience in the management of (international) research projects and grants and in participation in international collaborative projects.

The applicant has obtained some additional funding (grants, sponsored research, etc.) in the past.

Satisfactory

The applicant is not well-known in his/her field. 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.

The applicant has limited experience in the management of (international) research projects and grants and/or in participation in international collaborative projects.

The applicant has obtained very little additional funding (grants, sponsored research, etc.).

Unsatisfactory

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 implementing the proposed research plan. The competencies of the Principal Investigator do not support the achievement of the proposed objectives.

The applicant has almost no experience in the management of (international) research projects and grants and has not participated in any international collaborative projects.

The applicant has not been successful in obtaining additional funding (grants, sponsored research, etc.).

In the case of start-up grant applications:

Outstanding

The applicant has excellent potential for successfully implementing the proposed research plan. The applicant is well-known in his/her field. Publications and/or monographs are at a very 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.

The applicant has been a postdoctoral fellow or has acquired comparable research experience in a foreign country.

The applicant has very good experience in participation in international collaborative projects.

Very good

The applicant has very good potential for successfully implementing the proposed research plan. The applicant is known in his/her 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.

The applicant has been a postdoctoral fellow or has acquired comparable research experience in a foreign country.

The applicant has good experience in participation in international collaborative projects.

Good

The applicant has good potential for successfully implementing the proposed research plan. The applicant is to some extent known in his/her field. Some articles are published in peer-reviewed journals or international proceedings. Monographs are published by national 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.

The applicant has been a postdoctoral fellow or has acquired comparable research experience.

The applicant has some experience in participation in international collaborative projects.

Satisfactory

There is low potential for successfully implementing the proposed research plan. The applicant is not known in his/her field. 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.

The applicant has been a postdoctoral fellow or has acquired comparable research experience.

The applicant has little experience in participation in international collaborative projects.

Unsatisfactory

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

The applicant has neither been a postdoctoral fellow nor has acquired any comparable research experience in a foreign country.

The applicant has not participated in any international collaborative projects.

3. Quality and adequacy of the infrastructure and research environment

Meets the needs

The physical infrastructure and research environment meet the requirements and support the achievement of the established objectives.

Does not meet the needs

The physical infrastructure and research environment are not adequate and do not support the achievement of the established objectives.