

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

## Conditions of and Procedure for Personal Research Funding Applications for Start-Up Grants

### Chapter 1 GENERAL PROVISIONS

#### 1. Scope of Application

- 1.1. This directive establishes the conditions and procedure for applying for, evaluating, awarding, allocating, and reporting on personal research funding (start-up 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. Goal

- 2.1. A start-up grant (hereinafter also *grant*) is aimed at supporting researchers with initial research experience to launch their independent research career at an Estonian research and development (R&D) institution, which has been regularly positively evaluated in at least one research field, to set up their research group, and to contribute to educating the next generation of researchers (incl. doctoral students).
- 2.2. A start-up grant is awarded for the implementation of an independent research project and its purpose is not funding self-financed research projects.
- 2.3. In awarding the grants, the Council is entitled to prioritise R&D fields for each year.

#### 3. Start-Up Project

A start-up project (hereinafter also *project*) is a description of a scientific study with a clearly defined research problem and a plan for conducting fundamental or applied research to address this problem.

#### 4. Applicant of a Start-Up Grant

- 4.1. A person (hereinafter *applicant*) can apply for funding if he/she
  - 4.1.1. has obtained his/her first doctoral degree or equivalent qualification in the R&D field in which the application is to be processed no less than two and no more than seven years prior to the 1<sup>st</sup> of January of the year the project is scheduled to begin. The date of awarding a doctoral degree or equivalent qualification is the date in the respective document issued by the awarding body. The Evaluation Committee may, where justified, consider eligible a person who has been awarded his/her first doctoral degree or equivalent qualification more than seven years prior to the 1<sup>st</sup> of January of the year the project is scheduled to begin. If the applicant has been on pregnancy, maternity or

- parental leave, or in compulsory military service after obtaining his/her first doctoral degree or equivalent qualification in the R&D field in which the application is to be processed, the period of qualification is extended by the corresponding period in full months and is rounded up to the higher number of months;
- 4.1.2. has acquired research experience (e.g., as a postdoctoral fellow, researcher at an R&D institution, etc., preferably in a foreign country) after obtaining his/her doctoral degree or equivalent qualification;
  - 4.1.3. has not previously been the Principal Investigator of a personal research funding (start-up or exploratory) project or the Principal Investigator of an institutional research funding topic;
  - 4.1.4. has received the consent from a positively evaluated Estonian R&D institution (hereinafter *host institution*). The host institution will give the consent for submitting the application and for fulfilling its obligations by confirming the application.
- 4.2. An applicant can simultaneously apply for one start-up or team grant and may be listed as a member of the senior research staff in one application for either a start-up or team grant.
  - 4.3. A person cannot apply for the grant if:
    - 4.3.1. his/her applications submitted during the two previous consecutive calls did not pass the threshold set by the Council in at least one evaluation criterion;
    - 4.3.2. he/she has, during the three years before applying for the grant, failed to submit the report on a previous project funded by the Council by the deadline without a valid reason or the report has not been accepted by the Council.
  - 4.4. The applicant must be the Principal Investigator of the project for which the grant is applied for.

## 5. Processing Grant Applications

The Council is responsible for processing grant applications.

## Chapter 2 CONDITIONS FOR APPLYING FOR A GRANT

### 6. Applying for a Start-Up Grant

- 6.1. The period of the annual call for applications is established and announced by the Council.
- 6.2. The applicant is to submit the application, which has been approved by the host institution, to the Council via the Estonian Research Information System (hereinafter *ETIS*).
- 6.3. The application must be written in English.
- 6.4. The application shall specify the following:
  - 6.4.1. the applicant;
  - 6.4.2. the title of the project in Estonian and in English;
  - 6.4.3. a summary of the project in Estonian and in English;
  - 6.4.4. the requested grant period;

- 6.4.5. the scientific background of the project;
  - 6.4.6. the main objectives of the project, hypotheses, methods, and the work plan, incl. tentative annual work plans and the availability of the infrastructure necessary for achieving the objectives of the project;
  - 6.4.7. the expected results and their potential applicability, importance for Estonian research, culture, society, and/or economy as well as possible directions for future research;
  - 6.4.8. an explanation about how the results of the project will be disseminated to the public;
  - 6.4.9. an explanation about how the compliance with ethical issues 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, and 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;
  - 6.4.10. an explanation about which data will be generated during the implementation of the project and how the data will be managed;
  - 6.4.11. the grant type applied for pursuant to the fixed amounts set out in the “Guidelines for Budgeting Personal Research Funding Applications” (hereinafter *budget guidelines*) and its justification, incl. the distribution of direct costs;
  - 6.4.12. a description of the applicant’s previous R&D activities indicating his/her contribution to the publications, industrial property item(s), and to the projects of great relevance for the implementation of the proposed project that have been linked to the application as well as the supervision experience of students;
  - 6.4.13. information on the involvement of partners and experts as well as on the R&D cooperation necessary for the implementation of the project;
  - 6.4.14. the role of the (senior) research staff involved in the project and the distribution of their tasks. One person can simultaneously be listed as a member of the senior research staff in no more than two start-up and/or team grant applications;
  - 6.4.15. if necessary, additional documents, incl. applications for making the exceptions stipulated in clauses 4.1.1. and 7.1.1., and a confirmation letter detailing that the host institution will enter into an employment contract with the applicant and/or the member of the senior research staff for implementing the project if such a contractual relationship does not already exist at the time of submitting the application;
  - 6.4.16. a confirmation that the principles of research ethics and good research practice will be adhered to during the conception and implementation of the project.
- 6.5. The Council is entitled to demand additional information and documents from the applicant and the host institution.

## **7. Principal Investigator of a Start-Up Project**

- 7.1. The Principal Investigator of a start-up project may be an applicant who:
  - 7.1.1. is employed full-time at the host institution and has a place of work in Estonia at the time

of implementing the project and who shall fully or partially be remunerated from the grant. In exceptional cases, the Evaluation Committee may consider eligible the Principal Investigator of a start-up project who is not 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 and a researcher).

- 7.2. During the grant period, the Principal Investigator of a start-up project cannot be any of the following:
  - 7.2.1. the postdoctoral fellow, the Mobilitas Pluss postdoctoral fellow, or the Principal Investigator or a member of the senior research staff of a start-up, exploratory, or team project;
  - 7.2.2. the Principal Investigator or a member of the senior research staff of an institutional research funding topic.
- 7.3. The Principal Investigator of a start-up project cannot be replaced after the submission of the application or during the grant period. In case of the suspension or termination of the grant contract with the host institution, the rights and obligations of the Principal Investigator will not be transferred to the other members of the project.

## **8. Participants of a Start-Up Project**

- 8.1. In addition to the Principal Investigator of the start-up project, the following people may participate in the implementation of the project:
  - 8.1.1. members of the senior research staff who are employed at the host institution during the implementation of the project, have necessary qualifications for carrying out the research tasks foreseen in the project, and who shall fully or partially be remunerated from the grant;
  - 8.1.2. other members of the research staff, incl. students, whose work is related to the topic of the project.
- 8.2. During the grant period, a member of the senior research staff cannot be any of the following:
  - 8.2.1. one of the other members of the research staff of the same project;
  - 8.2.2. the postdoctoral fellow, the Mobilitas Pluss postdoctoral fellow, or the Principal Investigator or a member of the senior research staff of a start-up, exploratory, or team project;
  - 8.2.3. the Principal Investigator or a member of the senior research staff of an institutional research funding topic.

## **9. Amount of a Start-Up Grant**

- 9.1. A start-up grant contains costs directly related to the implementation of the project and overhead costs. Direct costs consist of staff costs and research costs:
  - 9.1.1. Staff costs consist of the salary along with any and all state taxes, contributions, benefits, compensation arising from law, and scholarships for students;

- 9.1.2. Research costs are travel costs, acquisition costs of fixed assets directly related to the implementation of the project (in accordance with the definition established by the host institution), subcontracting costs, incl. the costs related to authorisation agreements and contracts for services, costs related to the publication and popularisation of the R&D 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.
- 9.1.3. Overhead costs are ongoing operational costs incurred by the host institution that are related to the management of the grant by the institution and are aimed at providing a high-quality research environment for the participants of the project.
- 9.2. Depending on the specifics of the research field, specific research methods (incl. experimental methods), and the number of the people participating in the project, start-up grants are divided into fixed-amount grant types.
- 9.3. Each year, the Council establishes fixed amounts for the grants in the budget guidelines. The Council may also establish the maximum amounts for various types of costs.
- 9.4. The applicant is entitled to request a smaller amount than the fixed amount.

## **10. Funding Period of a Start-Up Grant**

The funding period of a start-up grant is up to four years.

## **Chapter 3 EVALUATION OF APPLICATIONS AND AWARD OF GRANTS**

### **11. Checking the Technical Details of the Applications**

- 11.1. The Council is responsible for checking the technical details of the applications.
- 11.2. When checking the technical details of the applications, it will be determined if the application, the applicant, and the host institution meet all the necessary requirements.
- 11.3. The content of the applications will not be evaluated.
- 11.4. 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.
- 11.5. If the applicant, the host institution, or the application does not meet the necessary requirements and it has been impossible to correct the inaccuracies stipulated in clause 11.4., the Council will reject the application without processing it.

### **12. Evaluation of Applications**

- 12.1. The evaluation of grant applications is organised by the Council.
- 12.2. The applications are evaluated by the Evaluation Committee on the basis of the Regulation No. 74

“The Procedure for the Formation and the Rules of Procedure of the Evaluation Committee of the Estonian Research Council” issued by the Minister of Education and Research on 27 December 2011 and on the “Guidelines for Evaluating Personal Research Funding Applications for Start-Up Grants” (hereinafter *evaluation guidelines*) approved by the Council.

- 12.3. The Council may set thresholds in the guidelines when evaluating the applications. The grant will not be awarded if the application does not pass the threshold in at least one evaluation criterion.
- 12.4. The initial evaluation of the applications is carried out by field-specific Expert Panels that have been convened by the Evaluation Committee. The Evaluation Committee is entitled to decide which Expert Panel will process which application.
- 12.5. Each application will be given justified evaluations and scores by at least two independent reviewers. At least one of the reviewers must be from a foreign country.
- 12.6. Although non-binding, the Expert Panels shall rely on the evaluations and scores of the reviewers. The Expert Panels will submit the combined evaluations given to each application belonging to their field of expertise to the Evaluation Committee.
- 12.7. The Evaluation Committee is responsible for giving each application its final evaluation and score. Although non-binding, the Evaluation Committee shall rely on the combined evaluations given by the Expert Panels when forming the consolidated evaluation.
- 12.8. Based on the final evaluations and scores, the Evaluation Committee will compile field-specific ranking lists for all applications. The applications of equal standing will be ranked by the Evaluation Committee according to the principles described in the evaluation guidelines.
- 12.9. In the final evaluation, the Evaluation Committee may prescribe certain conditions that the Principal Investigator of a start-up project and the host institution are required to fulfil upon receiving the grant.
- 12.10. The Council will make the evaluations and scores stipulated in clause 12.5. and 12.8., the initial financing proposal (hereinafter *proposal*) of the Evaluation Committee, and the position of the applicant in the field-specific ranking list of start-up grant applications known to the applicant and to the host institution.
- 12.11. The applicant and the host institution are entitled to submit a written joint opinion and make objections regarding the proposal 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 applicant and the host institution have to submit a consent to secure the compliance with these conditions.
- 12.12. If an applicant whose application was to be approved by the Board of the Council based on the proposal made by the Evaluation Committee or who has been awarded a start-up grant by the Board of the Council waives the grant, then the grant will be awarded to the next applicant in the same field-specific ranking list of start-up grants. In justified cases, the Evaluation Committee may propose to award the grant to the next applicant in the same field-specific ranking list of team

grants or to the next applicant in the ranking list of start-up or team grants in another research field.

- 12.13. The Council is entitled to reject the application if intentional false information, plagiarism, or fraudulent activities become evident.

### **13. Award of a Start-Up Grant**

- 13.1. Considering the final evaluation, the results of the hearing, and the position of the applicant in the field-specific ranking list of start-up grants, the Evaluation Committee will submit a justified and impartial proposal to the Board of the Council:
- 13.1.1. to approve the application and award the grant;
  - 13.1.2. to approve the application partially and award the grant for one year;
  - 13.1.3. not to approve the application.
- 13.2. The decision to approve or not to approve the application is concluded by a directive of the Board of the Council. In case of approval, the directive shall indicate the grant period and the annual amount of the grant.

## **Chapter 4**

### **ALLOCATION OF GRANTS AND CONTINUATION OF FUNDING**

#### **14. Allocation of a Start-Up Grant**

- 14.1. The grant is allocated to the host institution based on a tripartite contract (hereinafter *grant contract*) entered into by the Council, the host institution, and the Principal Investigator of the start-up project that is signed annually for each budget year via ETIS. The grant contract entails the rights, obligations, and responsibilities of the parties.
- 14.2. The grant contract shall be entered into no later than one month after the decision stipulated in clause 13.2. has been made. In case of multi-annual projects, a new grant contract is concluded each year no later than one month after the decision stipulated in clause 15.7. has been made.
- 14.3. The host institution shall enter into an employment contract with the Principal Investigator and the member(s) of the senior research staff of the start-up project, if such a contractual relationship did not already exist at the time of awarding the grant, within one month after signing the grant contract.
- 14.4. During the first six months of the project, the Principal Investigator of a start-up project shall submit the data management plan to the Council.

#### **15. Continuation of Funding and Changing the Amount of a Grant**

- 15.1. In order to continue receiving funding, the Principal Investigator of the start-up project has to submit the following information, after having been approved by the host institution, via ETIS within the time limit established by the Council:
- 15.1.1. changes in the composition of the members of the senior research staff;

- 15.1.2. the distribution of the direct costs financed with the grant money;
- 15.1.3. the fulfilment of the conditions stipulated in clauses 12.9. or 15.5. in case such conditions were prescribed.
- 15.2. The Principal Investigator of a start-up project lasting for four years shall prepare an interim report during the third year on the preceding period of the project either in Estonian or in English. The interim report, after having been approved by the host institution, has to be submitted to the Council via ETIS no later than by 31 March. The interim report shall include the following:
  - 15.2.1. a summary of the results of the study;
  - 15.2.2. the distribution of the direct costs financed with the grant money;
  - 15.2.3. information on significant changes in the project, incl. changes in the composition of the members of the senior research staff;
  - 15.2.4. the fulfilment of the conditions stipulated in clauses 12.9. or 15.5. in case such conditions were prescribed.
- 15.3. The Council is entitled to demand additional information from the Principal Investigator of the start-up project and from the host institution.
- 15.4. Based on the information stipulated in clause 15.1. and on the interim report stipulated in clause 15.2., the Evaluation Committee will submit a justified proposal to the Board of the Council:
  - 15.4.1. to continue funding at the requested rate, but no more than at the rate of the fixed amount of this grant type, if there are no significant changes concerning the sustainability of the project or the fulfilment of the conditions established by this directive;
  - 15.4.2. to continue funding at a lower rate than requested if the appropriations from the annual Estonian state budget precipitate it;
  - 15.4.3. not to continue funding if:
    - 15.4.3.1. the conditions stipulated in clauses 12.9. or 15.5. have not been fulfilled;
    - 15.4.3.2. the sustainability of implementing the project has significantly decreased or is insufficient;
    - 15.4.3.3. the Principal Investigator of the start-up project and the host institution have not submitted the information stipulated in clause 15.1. or the interim report stipulated in clause 15.2. within the prescribed time limit;
    - 15.4.3.4. there are other adverse and justified circumstances.
- 15.5. The Evaluation Committee may prescribe certain conditions in the proposal stipulated in clauses 15.4.1. or 15.4.2. that the Principal Investigator of the start-up project and the host institution are required to fulfil to continue receiving funding. If so, the Principal Investigator of the start-up project and the host institution have to submit a consent and an action plan to secure the compliance with these conditions.
- 15.6. In the case referred to in clause 15.4.3., the Principal Investigator of the start-up project and the host institution are entitled to submit a written joint opinion and make objections regarding the proposal within the time limit established by the Council.
- 15.7. The decision to continue or not to continue funding is concluded by a directive of the Board of the Council. In case of continuation, the directive shall indicate the grant period and the amount of

the grant.

## **16. Changing the Host Institution**

- 16.1. The Principal Investigator of the start-up project is entitled to change the host institution. In order to do that, the Principal Investigator of the start-up project shall submit a request to the Council along with the consent of the new host institution and a letter of confirmation stating that the previous host institution has been informed.
- 16.2. The Evaluation Committee shall evaluate the quality and sufficiency of the research environment and infrastructure necessary for achieving the objectives of the project, and if members of the senior research staff are involved in the project, the sustainability of the project. In case of
  - 16.2.1. approval, the Council shall enter into a new grant contract with the Principal Investigator of the start-up project and the new host institution that has to enter into an employment contract with the Principal Investigator of the start-up project within one month, and terminate the grant contract entered into with the Principal Investigator of the start-up project and the previous host institution;
  - 16.2.2. disapproval, a new grant contract will not be entered into.
- 16.3. The new grant contract shall be entered into no later than three months. Until the new grant contract is concluded, the Council shall suspend the payments.
- 16.4. After the termination of the grant contract, the host institution is required to refund the unused grant money along with a proportional fee of overhead expenses to the Council's bank account 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**

## **17. Temporary Suspension of a Start-Up Project**

- 17.1. The Principal Investigator of the start-up project can request may request a temporary suspension of the project in case of pregnancy, maternity or parental leave, compulsory military service, serious illness, or other exceptional circumstances, due to which the implementation of the project will become impossible or significantly more difficult.
- 17.2. The application for a temporary suspension of the project has to be submitted prior to the beginning of the suspension period in agreement with the host institution to the Board of the Council.
- 17.3. The Principal Investigator of the start-up project may request a temporary suspension of the project for up to three years. The end date of the project will be extended by the period of suspension.
- 17.4. The grant contract will be suspended for the temporary suspension period of the project.

## **18. Termination of a Start-Up Project**

- 18.1. The project will end on the end date of the grant period.
- 18.2. All the activities financed with the grant money must be carried out by the end date of the project.
- 18.3. The host institution is required to refund the unused grant money along with a proportional fee of overhead costs to the Council's bank account no later than seven calendar days upon receiving the corresponding claim for refund from the Council. The Principal Investigator of the start-up project and the host institution are required to submit the final report of the project pursuant to clause 19.

## **19. Submission of the Final Report**

- 19.1. The Principal Investigator of the start-up project shall prepare the final report of the project either in Estonian or in English. The final report, after having been approved by the host institution, has to be submitted to the Council via ETIS no later than three months after the end date of the project.
- 19.2. The final report shall include the following:
  - 19.2.1. 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 articles 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 rights) in accordance with the objectives set in the application. Pursuant to clause 20.1., publications that do not contain a reference to the grant must not be included in the final report;
  - 19.2.2. the potential applicability of the results and their importance for Estonian research, society, and economy as well as possible directions for future research;
  - 19.2.3. a report on the usage of the grant in accordance with the accounting data of the host institution;
  - 19.2.4. the realisation of the data management plan;
  - 19.2.5. the fulfilment of the conditions stipulated in clauses 12.9. or 15.5. in case such conditions were prescribed;
  - 19.2.6. if the project necessitated compliance with the Nagoya Protocol, the due diligence declaration;
  - 19.2.7. additional information directly related to the project that the Principal Investigator of the start-up project and the host institution deem relevant.
- 19.3. If the Principal Investigator of the start-up project fails to submit the final report by the deadline, the final report shall be prepared and submitted by the host institution.
- 19.4. The Council will assess the final report and make the assessment available to the Principal Investigator of the start-up project and to the host institution via ETIS.

## **20. Making the Results of the Start-Up Project Public**

- 20.1. Upon the publication of the results of the project, a reference to the grant that was used for funding the project must be included.

- 20.2. The full texts of the articles 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.
- 20.3. If a publishing house restricts access to the articles temporarily, the host institution will make the full texts of the articles published as a result of implementing the project freely available via ETIS once the restriction has expired.
- 20.4. 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 via ETIS.

## **Chapter 6**

### **PREMATURE TERMINATION OF THE GRANT CONTRACT AND RECLAMATION OF A GRANT**

#### **21. Premature Termination of the Grant Contract**

- 21.1. The Council is entitled to revoke the decision of awarding the grant or the decision to continue funding and terminate the grant contract if:
  - 21.1.1. the Principal Investigator of the start-up project or the host institution have submitted a request to terminate the grant contract;
  - 21.1.2. the Principal Investigator of the start-up project does not meet the requirements stipulated in clauses 7.1. or 7.2.;
  - 21.1.3. the Principal Investigator of the start-up project is unable to continue with the project (the death of the postdoctoral fellow, serious illness, transitioning to other employment, moving to another country, or other substantial and justified circumstances);
  - 21.1.4. the Principal Investigator of the start-up project, the participant(s) of the project, or the host institution have fundamentally violated the requirements stipulated in this directive or by the legislation;
  - 21.1.5. 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;
  - 21.1.6. the Principal Investigator of the start-up project has failed to submit the data management plan on time;
  - 21.1.7. the Principal Investigator of the start-up project or the host institution have intentionally presented false information, or plagiarism or fraudulent activities have become evident in the project-related activities of the Principal Investigator;
  - 21.1.8. there are other adverse and justified circumstances.
- 21.2. After the revocation of the decision to award the grant or to continue funding the project and after the premature termination of the grant contract, the host institution is required to refund the unused grant money along with a proportional fee of overhead costs to the Council's bank account no later than seven calendar days upon receiving the corresponding claim for refund from the Council. The Principal Investigator of the start-up project and the host institution are required

to submit the final report pursuant to clause 19.

21.3. If the decision of awarding the grant or the decision to continue funding is repealed retrospectively, the Council may reclaim the grant from the host institution.

## **22. Audit and Reclamation of a Grant**

22.1. 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, including 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.

22.2. A grant not used for the intended purpose may be reclaimed by the Council from the host institution along with a proportional fee of overhead costs.