

Personaalse uurimistoetuse stardigrandi taotluste hindamisjuhend

Guidelines for Evaluating Personal Research Funding Applications for Start-Up Grants

1. Introduction

The award of personal research funding for start-up grants has been stipulated in the “Conditions of and Procedure for Personal Research Funding Applications for Start-Up Grants”.

“Guidelines for Evaluating Personal Research Funding Applications for Start-Up Grants” is a document which specifies the evaluation criteria set forth in the “Conditions of and Procedure for Personal Research Funding Applications for Start-Up Grants”.

2. Relevant terms

Personal research funding means funding allocated for a high-quality research and development (R&D) project carried out by a person or a research group working at an R&D institution, incl. the research scholarships for students (as specified in the Organisation of Research and Development Act). Personal research funding comprises three categories of grants corresponding to different levels of a research career: postdoctoral grants, start-up grants and team grants:

- A postdoctoral research grant is a grant aimed at supporting the launch of a research career of the people with a doctoral degree or equivalent qualification at strong R&D institutions or among highly qualified research groups. There are two types of postdoctoral grants:
 - a grant for a postdoctoral researcher coming to Estonia (Mobilitas Plus postdoctoral grant);
 - a grant for a postdoctoral researcher going abroad (personal research funding postdoctoral grant).
- A **start-up grant** is a grant aimed at supporting researchers with initial research experience to launch their independent research career at an Estonian R&D institution, to set up their research group, and to contribute to educating the next generation of researchers (incl. doctoral students).
- A team grant is a grant aimed at supporting researchers working at Estonian R&D institutions

in continuing their research career, ensuring high-quality research, leading a strong research group, and educating the next generation of researchers (incl. doctoral students).

A **research project** is a description of research activities with a clearly defined and justified research problem/topic and the methodology to address this problem/topic.

A **Principal Investigator (PI)** is a researcher who applies for a team grant, start-up grant, or postdoctoral grant and has received the consent from the host institution.

3. Criteria for applying

3.1. A **Principal Investigator of a start-up project** is a person who:

- 3.1.1. has obtained a doctoral degree or equivalent qualification no less than two and no more than seven years prior to the 1st of January of the year the project is scheduled to begin. 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 1st of January of the year the project is scheduled to begin. In that case, the maximum effective time elapsed since the award of the first doctoral degree can be reduced, but only in certain properly documented circumstances, e.g., parental leave and compulsory military service;
- 3.1.2. 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;
- 3.1.3. is employed full-time at the host institution and has a place of work in Estonia at the time of implementing the project. A Principal Investigator who is employed only part-time at an Estonian R&D institution (e.g., a healthcare practitioner) can be considered eligible by the Evaluation Committee if this does not jeopardise the successful realisation of the project.

4. Application

4.1 The application for a start-up grant (hereinafter *application*) shall include the following:

- 4.1.1. the applicant;
- 4.1.2. the title of the project in Estonian and in English;
- 4.1.3. a summary of the project in Estonian and in English;
- 4.1.4. the requested grant period;
- 4.1.5. the scientific background of the project;
- 4.1.6. 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;

- 4.1.7. the expected results and their potential applicability, importance for Estonian research, culture, society, and/or economy as well as possible directions for future research;
- 4.1.8. an explanation how the results of the project will be disseminated to the public;
- 4.1.9. 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;
- 4.1.10. an explanation about which data will be generated during the implementation of the project and how the data will be managed;
- 4.1.11. the grant type applied for pursuant to the fixed amounts set out in the “Guidelines for Budgeting Personal Research Funding Applications” and its justification, incl. the distribution of direct costs;
- 4.1.12. 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; the PI does not need to have previous team leadership and supervision experience;
- 4.1.13. information on the involvement of partners and experts as well as on the R&D cooperation necessary for the implementation of the project;
- 4.1.14. the role of the (senior) research staff involved in the project and the distribution of their tasks;
- 4.1.15. if necessary, additional documents, incl. applications for making the exceptions regarding the work load, the award of the doctoral degree or equivalent qualification 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;
- 4.1.16. a confirmation that the principles of research ethics and good research practice will be adhered to during the conception and implementation of the project.

Please keep in mind that the applicants have a limited number of characters they can use to describe each part of their project.

5. Evaluation process

5.1. The grant applications will be evaluated by the Evaluation Committee of the Council based on the well-reasoned opinions of at least two independent reviewers and the Expert Panel.

5.2. All applications are evaluated according to the same rules and procedures and all of them are treated equally. The final ranking list of the applications is formed by taking into consideration all relevant information and by comparing the applications in this particular call in field-specific ranking lists.

5.3. An overview of the bibliometric indicators of the applicant as an additional material for evaluation is used by the Expert Panel and by the Evaluation Committee for providing background information when evaluating the applications. The applicants are informed once their overviews have been compiled and offered the possibility to make clarifications.

6. Evaluation criteria and rating scale to be used for reviewing start-up grants

6.1. Evaluation criteria

When evaluating the applications, the following guiding questions are to be used for clearly explaining the opinions and justifying the ratings. Please comment on all criteria.

| Criterion | Guiding questions | Rating scale |
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| 1. Justification for the research project, incl. originality and relevance of the idea, its potential contribution to the development of the research field; clarity and ambitiousness of objectives; potential applicability of the expected results, taking the specifics of the research field into account | 1.1. How significant is the project scientifically? 1.2. To what extent is the research idea original and relevant to the research field? 1.3. To what extent are the objectives ambitious? 1.4. Have the objectives, hypotheses and/or research questions been carefully considered and presented? 1.5. Has it been clearly outlined where and how the expected results of the project will be used? Other comments on criterion 1. | From 1 to 5 |
| 2. Feasibility of the project (research plan), incl. methods, resources, and infrastructure | 2.1. Is the proposed research plan reasonable and plausible against the objectives of the project? 2.2. Are the research methods appropriate? 2.3. How well does the PI acknowledge potential scientific or methodological problem areas? 2.4. Does the research environment, incl. the research infrastructure, support achieving the objectives of the proposed project? | From 1 to 5 |

| | Other comments on criterion 2. | |
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| <p>3. Competence, expertise, and potential of the Principal Investigator</p> | <p>3.1. What are the merits and scientific expertise of the PI?</p> <p>3.2. Are the competencies of the PI appropriate and sufficient for the proposed project (considering that the PI does not need to have the previous team leadership and supervision experience)?</p> <p>3.3. Does the PI demonstrate the potential to lead independent research and show maturity?</p> <p>3.4. Is the PI's previous experience in participating in national and/or international projects sufficient for carrying out the proposed project successfully?</p> <p>Other comments on criterion 3.</p> | From 1 to 5 |
| <p>4. Ethical issues</p> <p>The applicants are required to consider the potential risks related to ethical issues of any procedure in the research projects. The applicants are asked to describe how the principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity of the subjects will be followed. The use of research methods that require a review or approval from a specific ethics committee should also be clearly indicated in the application (the need for such approvals will be checked by the Expert Panel). If the project necessitates compliance with the Nagoya Protocol, the applicant has to be aware of the fact that he/she has to obtain the due diligence declaration.</p> | <p>4.1. Has the applicant carefully considered and sufficiently addressed potential ethical issues?</p> <p>Other comments on criterion 4.</p> | 0 or 1 |
| <p>5. Data management</p> <p>The applicants are expected to describe which data will be created, managed, collected, and protected; which methods and standards will be applied; will the data be shared or made public and in which way;</p> | <p>5.1. Have data management issues, incl. data protection, been sufficiently addressed?</p> <p>Other comments on criterion 5.</p> | 0 or 1 |

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| <p>how the data will be stored during the period of the project and preserved after the end of the project. The applicants are expected to consider the issues related to the secure storage of data either obtained or used during the period of the project and make them available based on the open data principles (if not restricted due to data protection requirements).</p> | | |
| <p>6. Importance for Estonian research, culture, society, and/or economy</p> <p><i>This criterion will be evaluated only by the Expert Panel and the Evaluation Committee</i></p> | <p>6.1. Has the applicant analysed and described the importance of the project for Estonia?</p> <p>6.2. Will the project increase the visibility of Estonian research?</p> <p>6.3. Do the planned outcomes of the project enhance cultural enrichment, quality of life, health and/or well-being?</p> <p>6.4. Could the project potentially contribute to evidence-based policy-making and influence public policies and legislation in Estonia?</p> <p>6.5. Does the project help to improve social welfare, social cohesion and/or national security?</p> <p>6.6. Does the project contribute to environmental sustainability, protection, and impact reduction?</p> <p>6.7. Does the project enhance the efficiency, performance, and sustainability of businesses/organisations, incl. public services?</p> <p>6.8. Do the objectives of the project correspond to any Estonian strategic documents (e.g., the R&D&I strategy, smart specialisation, etc.)?</p> <p>6.9. Does the project include cooperation between R&D institutions and/or government authorities and/or enterprises in Estonia?</p> <p>6.10. Is the topic significant in the Estonian context?</p> <p>Other comments on criterion 6.</p> | <p>From 1 to 5</p> |
| <p>7. Justification for the grant type (small or big, experimental or non-experimental)</p> | <p>7.1. Has the grant type been clarified and is it justified?</p> <p>7.2. Is the estimation of the costs of the project realistic against the objectives?</p> | <p>0 or 1</p> |

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| <i>This criterion will be evaluated only by the Expert Panel and the Evaluation Committee</i> | Other comments on criterion 7. | |
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6.2. Rating procedure

6.2.1. A **five-point rating scale** is used for criteria 1, 2, 3, and 6. The evaluation is provided to a level of precision of 0.5 points:

- 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).

For criterion 6 (Importance for Estonian research, culture, society, and/or economy), the **coefficient** 0.8 is applied.

6.2.2. An **undifferentiated rating scale** is used for criteria 4, 5, and 7:

- Appropriate (1);
- Inappropriate (0).

6.2.3. The **final score** can range from 3.8 to 22 points.

6.2.4. Interpretation of ratings for criteria 1, 2, 3, and 6:

- Unsatisfactory (1) – the application addresses many of the aspects of the evaluation criteria inadequately and/or there are serious inherent scientific weaknesses.
- Satisfactory (2) – the application addresses most of the aspects of the evaluation criteria in very general terms and there are significant weaknesses. Major revision and clarification would be needed to significantly improve the application.
- Good (3) – the application addresses most of the relevant aspects of the evaluation criteria well, but a number of shortcomings are present. Some questions on methodology, scope, team, and/or relevance of the project could be elaborated on more thoroughly and more clearly. A sound research project with some issues to be considered.

- Very good (4) – the application addresses all relevant aspects of the evaluation criteria very well and only a small number of shortcomings are present. Minor revision and clarification would be suggested. A strong research project worthy of funding.
- Outstanding (5) – the application is very well elaborated and successfully addresses all aspects of the evaluation criteria. Any shortcomings are minor. A very promising project.

6.2.5. Interpretation of ratings for criteria 4, 5, and 7:

- Appropriate (1) – potential risks related to ethical issues and data management issues have been sufficiently addressed (please add a comment). The requested grant type and amount are well justified.
- Inappropriate (0) – potential risks related to ethical issues and data management issues have not been sufficiently addressed (adding a comment is obligatory).

6.3. Threshold

The funding threshold for criteria 1, 2, 3, and 6 is 3 points (*good*) before applying the coefficient and for criteria 4 and 5 is 1 point (*appropriate*). If an application receives less points than the threshold for at least one criterion, it does not qualify for funding.

7. Overall assessment and the final score for the application

This section will be filled in by the Evaluation Committee.

7.1. The final score for the application is a sum of justified assessment scores for all criteria (1-7) by the Evaluation Committee. The main arguments underlying the scores as well as the main strengths and weaknesses will be pointed out here.

7.2. If the budget is too small for funding all the projects which qualify for funding, then the procedure shall be as follows:

- 7.2.1. based on the final evaluation and scores, the Evaluation Committee will compile a ranking list for all applications;
- 7.2.2. the applications of equal standing will be ranked according to the scores received during the evaluation process in the very order of the evaluation criteria (i.e., as specified above);
- 7.2.3. the applications which sustain equal standing after the ranking procedure described in 7.2.2. will be prioritised according to the underrepresented gender among the applicants to be funded;
- 7.2.4. the applications which sustain equal standing for all aforementioned criteria will be prioritised in order to create more diversity of the R&D fields.

7.3. The projects will be funded in the order they appear in the ranking list.