

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

APPROVED

by the Board of the Estonian Research Council on 28.12.2020,
Directive No. 1.1-4/20/200

Guidelines for returning researcher grant applications 2021

Chapter 1

GENERAL PROVISIONS

1. Scope of Application

1.1. The guidelines establish the procedure for applying for, evaluating, allocating, and reporting on the returning researcher funding, and the conditions for suspending and terminating the project.

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. Aim

The aim of the activity is to bring researchers, who have studied or worked in foreign countries and have acquired skills and knowledge for conducting research and development, back to Estonian research and development institutions and businesses.

3. Definitions

Returning researcher – a researcher who is a current/former Estonian resident or an Estonian citizen and has acquired research experience outside of Estonia (e.g. as a postdoctoral fellow, researcher at an R&D institution, etc) after obtaining his/her doctoral degree or equivalent qualification, and who conducts basic or applied research or development and implements an independent returning researcher project.

Returning researcher project – the description of scientific research, which includes a clearly defined research problem and a specification of basic or applied research to be used for resolving the problem.

Return grant – a grant awarded to researchers coming to an Estonian research and development institution, undertaking or higher education institution for implementing a specific research and development project (hereinafter “grant”).

Host institution – an Estonian research and development institution, undertaking or higher education institution, which serves as the place of implementation of the returning researcher project and, upon award of the grant, enters into an employment contract with the returning researcher.

4. Applicants

4.1. A host institution can apply for the grant to be awarded to a person, who will implement the returning researcher project, i.e. the returning researcher. The application shall include a confirmation that the host institution will enter into an employment contract with the returning researcher for implementation of the returning researcher project.

4.2. A grant application can be submitted for a returning researcher, who has completed a postdoctoral fellowship or an equivalent level of research in a foreign country by the closing of the call for applications.

4.3. The place of work of a returning researcher immediately prior to 1 March 2020 must have been located outside of Estonia.

4.4. Preference is given to returning researchers who have previously received Estonian state funding in order to carry out a postdoctoral research project abroad.

4.5. The Council is entitled to prioritise research and development fields for each call for applications.

4.6. During the project, the returning researcher has to work at the host institution on a full-time basis with a place of work in Estonia.

4.7. The returning researcher, specified in the application, cannot be replaced during the application procedure and implementation of the returning researcher project.

5. Host Institution

5.1. The host institution shall provide information on other simultaneous applications, if any, submitted for funding the returning researcher project or any part thereof from several measures or other state budget, European Union or foreign aid funds.

5.2. If the grant being applied for can be construed as state aid (the support will also be used for economic activity), the application must include (under additional information on the relevant form) the information specified in Article 6 (2) of the General Block Exemption

Regulation¹, and the application must be submitted before the commencement of any relevant activities. The applicant must describe under additional information on the relevant form whether it applies for the grant according to General Block Exemption Regulation or as de minimis aid. If the support is applied for according to the General Block Exemption Regulation, the funding rate of the project depends on the conditions set in Article 25 of the General Block Exemption Regulation. The applicant must describe whether basic or applied research will be carried out during the project.

5.3. The host institution shall provide the returning researcher with the necessary working environment for implementing the project (incl. working space, administrative and support functions, etc).

6. Processing Return Grant Applications

The Council is responsible for processing grant applications (hereinafter “applications”).

Chapter 2

CONDITIONS FOR APPLYING FOR A GRANT

7. Applying for a Return Grant

7.1. The Council will establish the period of the annual call for applications and will announce it on its website and in the Estonian Research Information System (hereinafter ETIS).

7.2. The application is prepared by the host institution in cooperation with the returning researcher and it is then submitted to the Council via ETIS.

7.3. The application must be written in English.

7.4. The application shall specify the following:

7.4.1. the host institution of the return grant;

7.4.2. details of the returning researcher;

7.4.3. the title of the returning researcher project in Estonian and in English;

7.4.4. a summary of the returning researcher project in Estonian and in English;

7.4.5. the requested grant period;

7.4.6. the envisaged budget of the returning researcher project in accordance with clause 8;

¹ Commission Regulation (EU) No 651/2014 declaring certain categories of aid compatible with the internal market in application of Articles 107 and 108 of the Treaty (ELT L 187, 26.06.2014, p 1–78), amended by Commission Regulation (EU) 2017/1084 (ELT L 156, 20.06.2017, p 1–18)

7.4.7. the general scientific background of the envisaged returning researcher project, previous research and development activities of the returning researcher and their links to the returning researcher project;

7.4.8. the main objectives, hypotheses and methods of the returning researcher project, as well as the proposed annual work plans;

7.4.9. 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;

7.4.10. 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;

7.4.11. the place of implementation of the returning researcher project and the quality and sufficiency of the infrastructure necessary for achieving the objectives of the returning researcher project at the host institution;

7.4.12. the expected results, their potential scientific impact, possible directions for future research, and societal impact, incl. the potential applicability of the results and their importance for Estonian research, culture, society, and/or economy;

7.4.13. an explanation about which data will be generated during the implementation of the project and how the data will be managed;

7.4.14. a confirmation that the principles of research ethics and good research practice will be adhered to during the conception and implementation of the project;

7.4.15. an explanation about how the results of the project will be disseminated to the public.

8. Budget of the Grant

8.1. The fixed amounts for the grants or unit costs are based on the directive No. 1.1-4/20/1 of the Board of the Council „Guidelines for Budgeting Grant Applications“ approved on 6 January 2020.

8.2 The fixed amount for experimental project is €4,500 per month and for non-experimental project €4,250 per month:

8.2.1. the unit cost includes the salary fund of the returning researcher at the host institution, research expenses and overhead expenses;

8.2.2. it is not possible to get the unit costs for a shorter period than one month.

8.3. Unit costs of the returning researcher's relocation allowance:

8.3.1. the unit cost of relocation allowance is €4,000 for projects lasting for one year and €5,500 for projects lasting for two years;

8.3.2. the unit cost includes the allowance payable to the returning researcher, who is employed by the host institution, to cover the costs of relocation in Estonia, incl. any taxes applicable to allowances pursuant to Estonian legislation (no overhead is charged on the relocation allowance);

8.3.3. the returning researcher is entitled to request a relocation allowance if he/she has not lived, worked or studied six months immediately prior to the closing date of the call in Estonia;

8.3.4. the unit cost of relocation allowance shall be paid to the host institution as non-recurrent allowance at the beginning of the project.

9. Grant Period

9.1. The minimum grant period is 12 months and the maximum period is 24 months.

9.2. Implementation of the returning researcher project shall commence on 1 December 2021 at the latest. The grant period will commence on the date specified in the grant agreement.

Chapter 3

EVALUATION AND GRANTING OF APPLICATIONS

10. Processing and Evaluation of Applications

10.1. Processing of applications comprises the following stages:

10.1.1. registration of applications;

10.1.2. verification of compliance with the requirements for applications and host institutions;

10.1.3. requests for clarifications and further information or additions and modifications, if necessary;

10.1.4. decision on accepting or rejecting applications for further processing;

10.1.5. evaluation of applications;

10.1.6. decision to grant or reject applications.

10.2. The term for processing applications is up to 100 working days from the closing date of the call for applications.

10.3. The Council may require from the host institution and the returning researcher, in the course of processing an application, explanations and additional documents concerning the data set out in the application or additions to the application if the Council finds that the application is not sufficiently clear or contains omissions, specifying the exact elements that require clarification, modification or additional information. If omissions are eliminated, the requirement related to the omission is deemed as fulfilled.

10.4. When requesting additional information or elimination of omissions in the application, the Council will set a term of up to 10 working days, and the term of processing the application will be extended by the same term.

10.5. The term of processing an application can also be extended in other justified cases.

10.6. If the host institution, the returning researcher or the application does not meet the necessary requirements and the omissions are not eliminated by the deadline set by the Council, the Council will reject the application without evaluating the merits of the application.

10.7. The evaluation of applications is organised by the Council.

10.8. 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, on these guidelines, and the evaluation guidelines confirmed by the Council.

10.9. 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.

10.10. The Expert Panel can use the evaluations and scores of independent experts for the evaluation of applications.

10.11. Although non-binding, the Expert Panels shall rely on the evaluations and scores of the independent experts, if any. The Expert Panels will submit the combined evaluations given to each application belonging to their field of expertise to the Evaluation Committee.

10.12. 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.

10.13. The evaluation is based on the following criteria:

10.13.1. justification and scientific quality of the application (methods, expected results, incl. particular field-specific or application-related characteristics, data management plan, ethical issues, sufficiency of the infrastructure and budget, etc);

10.13.2. the qualifications of the returning researcher and the capacity to implement the project;

10.13.3. impact of the project on the development of Estonian research, culture, society, and economy.

10.14. The applications are scored for individual criteria on a scale of 1 to 5 as follows: 1 - inadequate; 2 - adequate; 3 - good; 4 - very good; 5 - excellent. Scores can be given at intervals of 0.5 points.

10.15. The criteria 10.13.1. and 10.13.2. each account for 40% and the criterion 10.13.3. for 20% of the final score.

10.16. The Evaluation Committee will compile a single ranking list for all applications based on the final evaluations and scores. The compliant applications will be granted in the order of ranking until depletion of the funds allocated for this call for applications.

10.17. In case of applications of equal final score, preference will be given to the application with higher score in the category of scientific quality. After that, preference will be given to the applicants coming to Estonia from abroad, having previously received Estonian state funding in order to carry out a postdoctoral research project abroad.

10.18. Applications with a final score lower than 3.5 will not be granted.

10.19. In the final evaluation, the Evaluation Committee may prescribe certain conditions that the host institution and the returning researcher are required to fulfil upon receiving the grant.

10.20. The Council will make the evaluations and scores of independent experts, the final evaluation and score, the initial financing proposal (hereinafter "proposal") of the Evaluation Committee, and the position of the applicant in the ranking list known to the host institution and the returning researcher. The host institution and the returning researcher are entitled to submit a written joint opinion on the initial 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 independent experts 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 host institution and the returning researcher have to submit a consent to secure the compliance with these conditions.

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

11. Granting of Applications

11.1. Considering the final evaluation and the joint opinion received from the host institution and the returning researcher, the Evaluation Committee will submit a justified and impartial proposal to the Council:

11.1.1. to grant the application in full;

11.1.2. to grant the application in parts;

11.1.3. to reject the application.

11.2. The Council has a right, subject to a reasoned decision, to send a proposal back to the Evaluation Committee for a repeat review.

11.3. The decision on full or partial granting or rejection of an application is made by a directive of the Board of the Council, specifying the grant budget for each granted application.

11.4. A decision on rejecting an application is made in the following cases:

11.4.1. based on the results of evaluation, the threshold specified in clause 10.18 is not exceeded or met;

11.4.2. the project cannot be supported due to the available budget for funding the applications;

11.4.3. the ethical issues of the project have not been adequately addressed;

11.4.4. the host institution does not consent to the decision on partial granting of the application or the conditions set.

11.5. The decision on the application will be sent to the host institution and the returning researcher via ETIS. A decision on granting or rejecting an application shall be sent to the host institution within 10 working days of making the decision.

Chapter 4

ALLOCATION OF GRANTS

12. Allocation of Grants

12.1. The Council will enter into a tripartite agreement (hereinafter “grant agreement”) with the host institution and the returning researcher. The grant agreement entails the rights, obligations, and responsibilities of the parties.

12.2. The grant is allocated to the host institution and the host institution shall enable the returning researcher to use the allocated grant for implementing the returning researcher project in accordance with the application.

12.3. The payment of the grant shall be subject to the terms and conditions specified in the tripartite grant agreement.

12.4. In case a grant is allocated, the host institution shall enter into an employment contract with the returning researcher for implementing the project if such a contractual relationship did not already exist at the time of awarding the grant or if the existing employment contract needs to be amended.

12.5. At the beginning of the project, a grant will be allocated to cover the costs of the first year of the project and at the beginning of the second year of the project, the remaining grant will be allocated.

Chapter 5

TEMPORARY SUSPENSION AND TERMINATION OF A PROJECT

13. Temporary Suspension of a Returning Researcher Project

13.1. Temporary suspension of a returning researcher project can be applied for in case the existing employment contract of the returning researcher with the host institution is temporarily suspended due to pregnancy, maternity or parental leave, compulsory military service, serious illness or other justified circumstances.

13.2. The returning researcher project can be temporarily suspended on the basis of a reasoned joint application of the host institution and the returning researcher, to be submitted to the Council. If necessary, a member of the Evaluation Committee will provide the Council with an assessment of the justification of temporary suspension of the returning researcher project.

13.3. In case of circumstances referred to in clause 13.1, the returning researcher project can be temporarily suspended for a period of up to three years. The end date of the project will be extended by the period of suspension.

13.4. The grant agreement will be suspended for the temporary suspension period of the project.

14. Termination of a Returning Researcher Project

14.1. The project will end on the end date of the grant period.

14.2. All the activities financed with the grant money must be carried out by the end date of the project.

15. Reporting

15.1. The host institution in cooperation with the returning researcher shall prepare the final report of the project either in Estonian or in English and the host institution shall submit it to the Council via ETIS no later than three months after the end date of the project.

15.2. The final report shall include the following:

15.2.1. the results (incl. the main results of the project in the form of a popular science summary both in Estonian and in English) in accordance with the objectives set in the application;

15.2.2. 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 as well as the industrial property rights);

15.2.3. the potential applicability of the results and their importance for Estonian research, society, and economy as well as the possible directions for future research;

15.2.4. if the project necessitated compliance with the Nagoya Protocol, the due diligence declaration;

15.2.5 additional information that the host institution and the returning researcher deem relevant;

15.2.6. a report on the usage of the grant.

15.3. In case of early termination of the returning researcher project, the host institution and the returning researcher are required to submit the final report of the project pursuant to clause 15.1.

15.4. In case the host institution is not able to prepare the final report in cooperation with the returning researcher, the final report shall be prepared and submitted to the Council by the host institution alone.

15.5. On the basis of the final report, the Council will assess the implementation of the returning researcher project and make the assessment available to the returning researcher and the host institution via ETIS.

16. Making the Results of the Returning Researcher Project Public

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

16.2. The full texts of the articles that have been published as a result of implementing the returning researcher 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.

16.3. 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 once the restriction has expired.

16.4. 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.

Chapter 6

EARLY TERMINATION OF THE GRANT AGREEMENT AND RECLAMATION OF A GRANT

17. Early Termination of the Grant Agreement

17.1. The Council is entitled to revoke the decision on granting the application and to terminate the grant agreement if:

17.1.1. the host institution or the returning researcher has submitted a respective request;

17.1.2. the host institution or the returning researcher has fundamentally violated the requirements stipulated in these guidelines or the grant agreement;

17.1.3. the returning researcher is unable to commence or continue implementing the returning researcher project (the death of the returning researcher, serious illness, transitioning to other employment, or other substantial and justified circumstances);

17.1.4. the licence from a human ethics or bioethics research committee has not been submitted prior to the beginning of human or animal experiments or it has become evident that the due diligence declaration stemming from the Nagoya Protocol has been disregarded;

17.1.5. the host institution or the returning researcher has intentionally presented false information, or plagiarism or fraudulent activities have become evident in the project-related activities of the returning researcher;

17.1.6. the Council will not be allocated funds from the state budget to cover the costs of the second year of the project;

17.1.7. there are other substantial and justified circumstances.

17.2. Before revoking the decision to grant the application or before terminating the grant agreement, the Council shall give the host institution and the returning researcher an opportunity to submit their position.

17.3. After the termination of the grant agreement, the host institution is required to refund the unused portion of the grant to the Council. The returning researcher and the host institution are required to submit the final report of the project pursuant to clause 15.

17.4. If the decision to grant the application is revoked retrospectively, the Council may reclaim the grant from the host institution.

18. Audit and Reclamation of a Grant

18.1. A grant not used for the intended purpose will be reclaimed by the Council from the host institution.

18.2. 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, incl. 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.