

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

## **Guidelines for Evaluating Starting Grant Applications**

### **1. Introduction**

- 1.1. This directive establishes the evaluation criteria and the principles for evaluating and compiling the ranking lists of the applications submitted according to the “Conditions and Procedure for Starting 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. Evaluation of Grant Applications**

- 2.1. The evaluation of the applications takes place in the Estonian Research Information System (hereinafter *ETIS*).
- 2.2. All applications are to be evaluated according to the same criteria and procedures in order to ensure equal treatment of all applications.
- 2.3. The final ranking list of the applications is formed by taking into consideration all relevant information and by comparing the applications in (sub-) field-specific ranking lists. The Expert Panel and the Evaluation Committee may use the overview of the bibliometric indicators of the applicant as an additional material for evaluating the applications.
- 2.4. The evaluation process is as follows:
  - 2.4.1. Processing the applications in the Expert Panel
    - 2.4.1.1. Each application will be reviewed by at least three independent experts, one of whom shall act as a rapporteur. In cooperation with and based on the evaluations given by the experts, the rapporteur will prepare the preliminary final evaluation for each application.
    - 2.4.1.2. The Expert Panel will confirm the preliminary final evaluation and the preliminary ranking list of the applications.
    - 2.4.1.3. During the hearing, the preliminary final evaluation will be made available to the applicant and to the institution.
  - 2.4.2. Processing the applications in the Evaluation Committee
    - 2.4.2.1. The Evaluation Committee will consider the results of the hearing, approve the final evaluation for each application, and compile the ranking lists of the applications.
    - 2.4.2.2. The applications that have passed the quality threshold will be forwarded to the Panel on Research Ethics. The Evaluation Committee is entitled to decide to not forward an application to the Panel on Research Ethics if, based on the position of the application in the ranking list and on the estimated funding allocated for the call, it is very unlikely that the application will be approved.
  - 2.4.3. Processing the applications in the Panel on Research Ethics
    - 2.4.3.1. The Panel on Research Ethics will give an evaluation on the criterion of research ethics and research data management.

2.4.3.2. The Panel on Research Ethics may make proposals for the implementation of the project and/or prescribe conditions that the applicant is required to comply with during the implementation of the project.

2.4.4. Processing the applications in the Evaluation Committee

2.4.4.1. Based on the final evaluations, which also include the evaluation given by the Panel on Research Ethics, the Evaluation Committee compile the final ranking lists of starting grant applications.

2.4.4.2. If the application did not pass the threshold in the criterion of research ethics and research data management, then it will not be included in the ranking list and the Evaluation Committee will submit a proposal not to approve the application.

### 3. Evaluation Criteria and Rating Scale

#### 3.1. Evaluation criteria

When evaluating the applications, the following evaluation criteria are to be used and the scores have to be justified. The justification has to be based on the sub-criteria. It is also possible to add other noteworthy observations for each evaluation criterion.

Evaluation criterion	Sub-criteria	Rating scale
1. Scientific justification for the research project	In this criterion, the scientific justification for the research project, the originality and relevance of the idea, and the clarity of the objectives are to be evaluated, based on the following questions: 1.1. How good and how clear is the scientific justification? 1.2. How precisely are the research questions and/or (excl. justified exceptional cases) hypotheses, and the objectives of the project defined? 1.3. To what extent is the research idea original and relevant in the context of the research field?	From 1 to 5
2. Feasibility of the research project	In this criterion, the feasibility of the research project, the justification for the research plan and risk reduction measures, proposed methods, and resources are to be evaluated, based on the following questions: 2.1. How specifically and appropriately are the feasibility of the project explained and the necessary resources justified? 2.2. How suitable and appropriate are the proposed research methods? 2.3. How appropriate is the chosen field-specific approach in terms of the research questions (intradisciplinary, interdisciplinary, or crossdisciplinary, a combination between several disciplines, etc.)? 2.4. How reasonable and purpose-driven is the research plan?	From 1 to 5

	2.5. How well are the potential scientific or methodological problem areas acknowledged and how well are the risk reduction measures and the back-up plan described?	
<b>3. Competence and potential of the applicant</b>	<p>In this criterion, the research activities of the applicant during the past 10 years (this period will be extended if the applicant has denoted a period of being away in the application since having obtained the doctoral degree, such as in case of pregnancy, maternity, or parental leave, compulsory military service, serious illness, or some other exceptional circumstance) are to be evaluated, based on the following questions:</p> <p>3.1. What are the merits and scientific expertise of the applicant of the past 10 years?</p> <p>3.2. How suitable are the scientific competences and the previous research experiences of the applicant for carrying out the proposed project successfully (e.g., postdoctoral studies or equivalent research qualification), participation in national and/or international research projects?</p> <p>3.3. How well and how sufficiently has the applicant planned the activities of the project for the development of his/her future research career and towards becoming a successful PI (development of professional and transferable competences, training, supervision of the members of the research team, incl. doctoral students, international and intersectoral cooperation, etc.)?</p>	From 1 to 5
<b>4. Importance and potential impact of the research project</b>	<p>In this criterion, the importance and potential of the research project are to be evaluated, based on the following questions:</p> <p>4.1. How specifically and appropriately is the <b>scientific</b> importance and the potential impact of the project described, considering the specifics of the research field and topic?</p> <p>4.2. To what extent are the possible ways of applying the expected results of the project considered?</p> <p>4.3. How carefully are the dissemination activities of the research among the research community planned and considered in order to exchange (international) scientific knowledge necessary in the context of the project?</p> <p>4.4. How specifically and appropriately is the importance and the potential impact of the project <b>outside academia</b> for the development of the research field</p>	From 1 to 5

	<p>described, considering the specifics of the research field and topic?</p> <p>4.5. How important are the expected results of the project for culture, society, and/or economy? Depending on the specifics of the research field and/or topic, the degree of importance may vary in the answers to one or several of the following questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the project address important topical challenges (incl. social and cultural issues), nationally and/or internationally?</li> <li>• Could the results of the project improve social welfare, social cohesion, and/or (cyber)security?</li> <li>• Could the results of the project help to solve important environmental challenges?</li> <li>• Could the results of the project initiate changes in policies, standards, strategic planning, guidelines, services, behaviours, etc.?</li> <li>• Does the project help to increase intersectoral cooperation, knowledge transfer, and innovation, incl. fostering research-intensive entrepreneurship (e.g., the project will be carried out between Estonian R&amp;D institutions and/or government authorities and/or enterprises)?</li> <li>• Could the project be impactful or significant in some way not listed above (please specify)?</li> </ul> <p>4.6. How well are the plans for public outreach (dissemination of the results among the wider public outside academia) considered?</p>	
<p><b>5. Research ethics and research data management</b></p> <p><i>This criterion will be evaluated only by the Panel on Research Ethics</i></p>	<p>In this criterion, the aspects of research ethics, incl. the aspects of research data management, that are related to the implementation of the research project are to be evaluated, based on the following questions:</p> <p>5.1. Has the applicant sufficiently, carefully, and properly assessed whether the project raises the issues of research ethics (e.g., questions related to human participation or involvement of animals; gender, age, cultural, etc. diversity issues; political, religious, societal, historical, and other sensitive topics; maintenance of biodiversity, environmental intervention, etc.)?</p>	Appropriate or inappropriate

	<p>5.2. Has the applicant provided a description of the action plan to address the legal requirements of research ethics (e.g., ethics committee approvals, specific research protocols, etc.) and explained how the requirements are to be met during the course of the project?</p> <p>5.3. Has the applicant sufficiently, carefully, and properly addressed potential risks that concern research integrity and data management which may arise during the project (e.g., credentials and questions of authorship, ownership of data and intellectual property rights, storage, back-up, and data protection, open data, etc.)?</p> <p>5.4. Has the applicant provided a description of the action plan to address the legal requirements of data management (e.g., the collection, management, storage, and destruction of sensitive data; field-specific data protection requirements, etc.) and explained how the requirements are to be met during the course of the project?</p>	
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### **3.2. Rating scales and the formation of the final score**

3.2.1. A nine-point differentiated rating scale is used for criteria 1, 2, 3, and 4:

- 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).

3.2.2. An undifferentiated rating scale is used for criterion 5:

- Appropriate;
- Inappropriate.

3.2.3. Interpretation of ratings for criteria 1, 2, 3, and 4:

- Unsatisfactory (1) – the application addresses many of the aspects of the evaluation criteria inadequately and/or there are serious inherent 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 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 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 most of the relevant aspects of the evaluation criteria very well and only a small number of shortcomings or issues to be considered are present. Minor revision and clarification would be suggested. The application is competitive on an international scale.
- Outstanding (5) – the application is remarkably well elaborated and all sub-criteria of the evaluation criteria have been met at an excellent level. The application is competitive on an international scale. An exceptionally strong application in all respects.

3.2.4. Interpretation of ratings for criterion 5:

- Appropriate – there are no shortcomings; there are some shortcomings or issues to be considered; it will be necessary to fulfil certain conditions during the implementation of the project (adding an explanation is obligatory).
- Inappropriate – there are very significant shortcomings (adding an explanation is obligatory).

3.2.5. The final score will be formed by summing up the scores given to the evaluation criteria. For criterion 4 (Importance and potential impact of the research project), the coefficient 0.8 is applied. The final score can range from 3.8 to 19 points.

### 3.3. Threshold

Two types of thresholds are used when evaluating the applications: the qualification threshold and quality threshold.

3.3.1. The qualification threshold for criteria 1, 2, 3, and 4 is 3 points (*good*) before applying the coefficient. The qualification threshold for criterion 5 is the rating “appropriate”. If the application does not pass the qualification threshold, then it does not qualify for funding and limitations could be placed upon the applicant in the next call.

3.3.2. The field-specific quality thresholds for starting grant applications are as follows:

- Exact Sciences 15.6 points;
- Biological and Environmental Sciences 16.6 points;
- Engineering and Technology 15.2 points;
- Medical and Health Sciences 14.6 points;
- Agricultural and Veterinary Sciences 13.7 points;
- Social Sciences 16.1 points;
- Humanities and the Arts 16.1 points.

If the application receives less points than the quality threshold before receiving the score for criterion 5, then it does not qualify for funding.

## 4. Basis for the formation of the ranking list

4.1. The ranking lists of the applications will be formed in accordance with the Expert Panel which processed the applications. The applications that have not passed the quality threshold will not be included in the ranking list.

4.2. The applications will be placed into the ranking list based on the final score given to each application. For ranking the applications with the same final score, the criteria to be used is as follows:

4.2.1. the applications of equal standing will be ranked according to the scores received during the evaluation process in the following order of the evaluation criteria: 3, 1, 2, and 4;

4.2.2. the applications which sustain equal standing after the ranking procedure described in 4.2.1 will be prioritised according to the underrepresented gender among the applicants whose applications rank above the applications of equal standing.

4.3. If the applications sustain equal standing after the ranking procedure described in 4.2.2, but it is necessary to compile a more exact ranking list for making the funding proposal, then the additional criteria to be used is as follows:

4.3.1. the applications will be prioritised according to the underrepresented (sub-)field of research among the applications which rank above the applications of equal standing;

4.3.2. the ranking of the applications which sustain equal standing after the ranking procedure described in 4.3.1 will be decided by lot in accordance with the conditions established by the Council.