

Experiences from the ERC advanced grant panel

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Who am I?

A professor in Cognitive Genetics. I have had, and still have, a long career in Medical Genetics, specializing on all aspects of the genetic causes of autism and intellectual disability.

I have been (and still am) a member of various grant panels, including and most relevant the ERC Advanced grant panel LS5 (Neuroscience) during period 2018-2024, e.g. 4 full cycles, the last 2 including an interview.



The panel composition

- The panel composition is very diverse and heterogeneous
- I am a typical panel member, but so are you



The panel selection by the candidate

- Make sure this is a good fit!!!
- You can get an impression of the composition of your panel and so of their expertise's on the website of the EC. In each case the chair is announced in advance.



The preproposal project

100 proposals to start with

- Read by 4 panel members, 1 serves as a lead – please realize these are generalists and not all are experts in your specific area of interest, explain your key techniques. This can be concise though. All reviewers read your proposal with care, but typically have 25 or so preproposals to review, which is a lot.
- Make the reviewer enthusiastic for your proposal.
- It should outline your concept and at the same time make clear how you will execute the problems associated with your proposal. The fine methodological details are not necessary, but nevertheless, the panel members must have the impression you are able to carry out the project plan.
- Ideas presented as novel typically score above average, but only if the panel considers the plan realistic. Preliminary results can be extremely helpful in that respect.
- Ideas that are conceived as a continuation of existing research projects of the applicant typically receive low scores
- Scores allowed are in the range 1-5, with typically a score of 4 necessary to be allowed to the full proposal stage.
- Previous ERC grants in our panel did not influence the CV scores specifically, prestigious grants in general do help



The CV is in the preproposal

It is imperative to have an excellent to outstanding CV

- Over the years, the relative contribution of the CV on the end score has diminished. Though it remains relevant, the CV is now also used to judge if the applicant is able to carry out the project
- An outstanding CV by itself is not sufficient for a high panel score for the preproposal
- The preproposal session ends with a ranking from 1-100, based on preproposal scores combined with CV appreciation. The grants that are considered fundable get an A score, the once with minor flaws, e.g., that the panel believes could work after some revisions a B score. Projects that are considered unrealistic or unfeasible a C score.
- The top 30 is invited to submit a full proposal.



The Full proposal

30 selected projects (these were submitted simultaneously with the preproposal) will be read by 4 panel members, selected on expertise and these are likely different from the preproposal. 1 lead. Realize you have thus between 4-8 readers with different expertise's, interest and opinions. Yet, all need to be convinced your project is outstanding

- All projects at this stage are excellent at least and which one is preferred is a matter of details. So write accordingly and pay attention to the even the tiniest details
- At this stage, methods need to be described in great detail, for the most challenging techniques, provide back-up plans
- Pay attention potential technical hurdles are avoided in the first work packages if the following work packages are dependent hereon.
- Make sure your proposal is a true ERC grants proposal, so tries to unravel a novel concept. Proposals that do well in national competition are typically insufficient for ERC funding
- Again, present your idea like you are on the verge of discovering a novel concept, but at the same time convince the panel you are able to carry the project out.
- Follow your own intuition!!! It has brought you at this stage, no need to change
- If you have had previous submissions, pay attention to the comments made



The Budget

- Be reasonable and fair
- Some funded projects have budgets worked out in in great detail



The External Reviews

- 30 projects will be sent out for review. The panel flags the potential reviewers, often from their own networks
- On average 3-4 reviews per proposal
- Reviews are by definition heterogeneous. Reviewers rarely oversee all techniques dealt with in the proposal
- Reviews are read with care and helpful, but never decisive. Sometimes projects with mixed reviews get priority scores by the panel nevertheless
- The full proposals are scored, again on the range 1-5



The Interview

Up to 30 proposals

- Prepare well. Make a serious, though pleasant introduction, that outlines the concept of your proposal. Nice graphics help! This to get the non-readers of your proposal on board
- Have a back-up plan for technical problems, log on in time and be aware the EC handles the Brussels time zone
- The lead-reader will start a discussion, typically followed by the co-readers, sometimes followed by others, but typically time is short
- Questions proposed by specialist external reviewers are frequently asked
- A poor interview reduces your chances dramatically, be sure you are up to date with all the aspects in your proposal, even if you outsource some aspects. It is your project and this should shine from the interview
- The projects and interviews are discussed in the panel to come to a consensus ranking



The Final score

10 proposals selected

- + 1-2 on the waiting list, may take a long time before a decision is made
- If not selected, pay attention to the comments for a revised submission. When resubmitting directly, be aware the EC works with 2 panels parallel, so resubmissions the following year are dealt with by an entirely different panel
- Unselected with an A score may reapply the following year (not all A's are invited for an interview), with a B score in 2 years and with a C score in 3 years time.



@DISCLAIMER

- The application process is a dynamic process, and details are changed continuously, especially with regard to the large volume of applications anticipated. The number of panel reviewers may be reduced, a minimal score for discussion in the panel may be required, the two step procedure may be adapted, resubmission possibilities may be limited, etc, etc.
- Keep an eye on het EC website



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Questions