

NCIP VaVal KnowledgeStor Case Study: European Research Council (ERC) Starting Grant ERC-22-STG Interview preparation

Using the example of “M”

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Expected audiences: Early career researchers who make it through Step 1 of the ECR process and are called to an interview

Keywords: Early career researchers, ECRs, European Research Council Starting Grant, ECR Starting Grant, interview preparation, Stage 2



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Who and why?

Who's eligible at a glance

For the ERC Starting Grant, only **selected individuals** are invited to the interview round, based on an evaluation of the B1 part (i.e., shorter scientific part) of their initial proposal.

- See: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1XJDkKgJ9OvGSJ9LnHmEWJPSpbBKsHI2xSC7KVq-r8rM/edit?usp=sharing> for a case study on ERC Starting Grant proposal preparation.

Those applicants invited to interviews receive an official invitation from ERC via the EU Funding & Tenders portal (<https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/>).

The interview is part of the final evaluation process, which consists of these steps, from the official ERC pages (<https://erc.europa.eu/apply-grant/starting-grant>):

Evaluation process

Proposals are evaluated by selected international peer reviewers who evaluate proposals on the basis of excellence as the sole criterion. It will be applied to the evaluation of both the research project and the Principal Investigator in conjunction.

Peer reviewers are in charge of assessing and scoring the proposals. Those who pass the quality threshold are ranked. Depending on the call budget available, a budgetary cut-off applies to the ranking list and only the highest ranked proposals are offered an ERC grant until the call's budget has been used.

For each call there are 27 panels, each covering a sub-section of one of three domains:

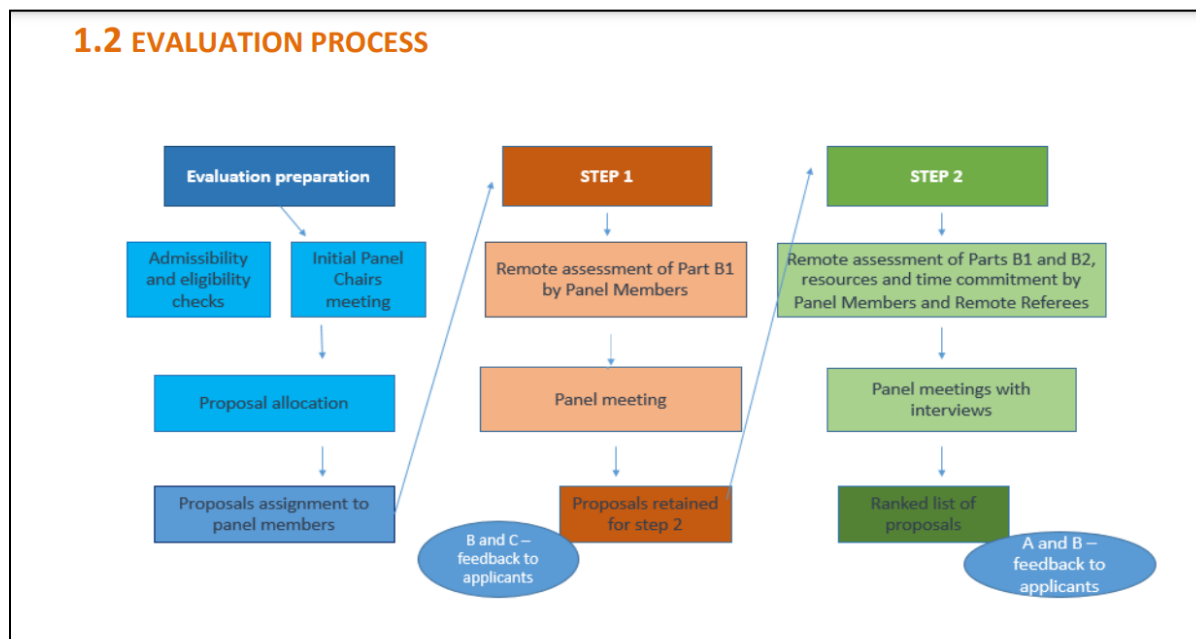
- *Social Sciences and Humanities (SH)*
- *Life Sciences (LS)*
- *Physical and Engineering Sciences (PE)*

*Each ERC panel consists of a chairman and 10-16 members. The panel chair and the panel members are selected by the **ERC Scientific Council** on the basis of their scientific reputation.*

In addition to the panel members (who act as “generalists”), the ERC evaluations rely on input from remote experts external to the panel, called referees. They are scientists and scholars who bring in the necessary specialised expertise.

Before the deadline of a call, the names of the panel chairs are published on the ERC website. Similarly, the names of panel members are published, however, after the evaluation process is concluded.


The panels, if you notice above, play a large role in the selection of applicants. Here is a graphic overview of the selection process, from a guide created for ERC panel members (https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/experts/guide-for-peer-reviewers_he-erc-stg-cog_en.pdf):



Overview: ERC evaluation process

Below are screenshots, with details of the applicant blanked out for privacy reasons, of an official invitation letter received by successful applicants at this stage (i.e., successfully passed Step 1 and moving on to Step 2). This letter was received by the case outlined here, early career researcher “M”.

I am including the letter here so that interested early career researchers have an idea what these official communications look like, including the kind of language they use.



erc
European Research Council
Executive Agency
Established by the European Commission

Brussels, 06 May 2022
Ares(2022)3452489
[Review session: Step 1](#)

Subject: Initial information on the outcome of the evaluation of proposals submitted to the Call for Proposals ERC-2022-STG - Proposal n° [REDACTED]

Dear Applicant,

I am pleased to inform you that the ERC evaluation panels, composed of independent experts, have favourably reviewed your proposal in Step 1 of the evaluation process. We cordially invite you to attend an interview with the evaluation panel.

Date:	The video-conference interviews for your panel will take place from 12/09/2022 to 16/09/2022. Please make sure to keep these days free.
Evaluation panel:	PE8
Interview content:	Interviews will last between 20 and 30 minutes. They will include a short presentation by the applicant and time for questions and answers. The panel meeting is foreseen to take place in Brussels but applicants will be interviewed remotely .
Link to add your phone number:	[REDACTED]

More specific information containing the precise date and time of your video-conference interview and its content will be communicated to you at a later stage.

Telephone-conference may be used in case of technical problems occurring during the video-conference. Please fill in the telephone number where you would be reachable during the interview in such a situation, via the link indicated above at your earliest convenience but **no later than 16/05/2022**. Please note that it is your responsibility to provide us with a correct phone number where you can be reachable during your interview.

If, in very exceptional cases, you are unable to participate in the video-conference or telephone-conference (e.g. pregnant applicants whose due date falls within or very close to the given week), please notify the ERCEA as soon as possible but no later than **16/05/2022**.



European
Commission

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Jhansi.KOTA@ec.europa.eu | <http://erc.europa.eu>

Please also note that as a successful Step 1 applicant, you will not receive further feedback on the Step 1 review of your proposal.

This letter should in no way be considered as a commitment of financial support by the European Union.

For any further information, please do not hesitate to contact the ERC Executive Agency at:
ERC-2022-STG-APPLICANTS@ec.europa.eu

Yours sincerely,

Angela Liberatore
Head of Scientific Management Department
ERC Executive Agency

Screenshots of interview notification letter

Why?

ERC invites successful Step 1 applicants to interviews in order to **provide insight into the applicant as a supplement to the written proposal**.

Interviews provide the applicant with the opportunity to present their idea in short form, and panel members are able to ask the applicant questions about the proposal and the idea presented, in real time.

What?

What does the funding include?

According to the official ERC page (<https://erc.europa.eu/apply-grant/starting-grant>):

Starting Grants may be awarded up to € 1.5 million for a period of 5 years. (pro rata for projects of shorter duration). However, an additional € 1 million can be made available to cover eligible “start-up” costs for researchers moving from a third country to the EU or an associated country and/or the purchase of major equipment and/or access to large facilities and/or other major experimental and field work costs.

An ERC grant can cover up to 100% of the total eligible direct costs of the research plus a contribution of 25% of the total eligible costs towards indirect costs.

What is submitted?

Applicants must provide the **phone number** where they can be reached during the interview, using the link provided by ERC in the interview invitation letter.

Interviewees in 2022 **were not asked to provide their slides in advance**; rather, ERC used WebEx as a tool and the presenter (applicant) was responsible for making sure the slides worked in WebEx, loading the presentation “live” when called to present.

Because of this, in M’s case, we held **several practice sessions in WebEx**, making sure the presentation opened correctly, and that audio was working properly, (see Case Study details later in this document).

Part B2 of the applicant’s proposal, the longer part of the scientific part of the Starting Grant application, is evaluated in this interview/Step 2 stage.

Feedback on both the interview and Part B2 itself is then provided in a **final decision report**.

Where/How?

Official instructions

- An official interview preparation interview is available at: <https://youtu.be/F4qXVGcdH5w>

- The case study outlined below provides details on how applicant M prepared for his interview.

When?

Deadlines and announcements

In 2022, announcements about interviews were made in May 2022, with specific details following closer to the September 2022 interview.

Future timelines might vary, depending on the number of applicants and composition of the review panel. Timelines are announced on the ERC Starting Grant website; for example, for 2023 instructions have already been posted:

<https://erc.europa.eu/timeframe-starting-grant-2023-evaluation-erc-2023-stg>

Case Study

Summary of researcher profile

- Early career researcher at Czech Technical University in Prague (CTU)
- Has half-time appointment at CTU, and another half-time appointment at the Czech Science Foundation, and works on many grant projects in various capacities, but wants to set up his own research group in an area not yet explored in the Czech research context.
- For M's proposal writing case study, see:
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1XJDkKgJ9OvGSJ9LnHmEWJPSpbBKsHI2xSC7KVq-r8rM/edit?usp=sharing>

Process

May 2022: Notification, interview stage

- M notified me that he was invited to the interview stage, sharing the notification letter with me. He said he would immediately start working on his presentation.

September 2022: Interview preparation

- My CTU colleague scheduled a practice interview with the applicant and very high-level researchers from Czech Technical University, Brno University of Technology (this presentation reviewer had previously served on the ERC engineering panel), and an international reviewer with ERC experience. Here is an excerpt from the email my CTU colleague sent to these mock interview participants:

According to information [APPLICANT] received from ERC (and Panel PE8), the interview will be held online and his presentation is limited to 5 minutes only, followed by a subsequent discussion with the panel members.

We plan to follow a similar format for [APPLICANT's] mock-up interview, i.e., a five-minute presentation followed by a subsequent discussion (up to one hour). As for the date, we are aiming for [DATES], which would give [APPLICANT] enough time to incorporate your comments before his genuine interview on 14 September 2022.

- M and I met virtually the day before the interview to talk about his preparation to that point. He gave me a brief presentation, and we discussed strengths and weaknesses at that point.
- As a follow-up, he sent me his slides to proofread and critique.
- Mock interview with experts was held, with the applicant practicing in the room where he would do the actual interview. The experts provided critical feedback on the presentation. In this case, feedback included both **commentary on the content** of the presentation as well as comments about **technical hiccups**; the applicant's audio wasn't working ideally, and so this distracted listeners from the scientific content presented by the applicant in this practice session.
- The applicant reached out to another colleague for additional advice, noting:
 - *He gave me several tips for the interview. He told me that he liked the intro of my presentation about [XXX; SK: removed for privacy reasons] and that it was good to have it there (even for him). He also told me to remove the slide about myself to have more time to talk about the research part. I would say that half of the tips were opposite to the comments of [previous expert reviewers] et al., e.g., that it is important to say I will implement everything into open-source software.*
- The applicant provided my CTU colleague and me with the next version of the presentation to review. We reviewed this and sent the applicant comments and scheduled another presentation practice session, just with us and a guest invited by my CTU colleague.
- We held one more practice session, due to glitches and revisions to the presentation, also with another CTU colleague who had not heard the presentation before.

Main issues from these later practice sessions included smoothness of the presentation (reviewers recommended memorizing the presentation to the extent possible; to view it like a performance in which you keep going no matter what happens), including a smooth opening of the presentation with audio in WebEx.

- The applicant went through an FAQ list for interviews, asking me to review his answers (I had suggested scripting answers in advance to make sure he was prepared fully). I provided him with feedback in a Google Document he created for this purpose for his review prior to the presentation.

Sample FAQ questions:

Scientific questions

- **What is the most critical step in your proposal?**
- **What is most innovative in your proposal?**
- **Why is this groundbreaking research?**
- **Can you generate general conclusions from your specific results?**
- **Do you see any risks in your proposal?**
- **How will you carry on with the project if your methodology does not work out?**
- **What will you do if stage 1 in your research yields null results?**
- **Where do you see the main challenges in your proposal?**
- **Why do you focus only on this, not on that?**
- **How exactly will you do the data analysis?**
- **In what is your approach different from other approaches?**
- **Did you consider ethical aspects?**
- **Why do you do this? It's not necessary...**
- **Do you have any preliminary results?**
- **How is this project different from the projects you are/were currently involved in?**

Budget questions

- **Why do you need so many team members?**
- **What will you do if we finance your project with 2 PhD students less?**
- **Is there some chance to save some money in terms of budget cut?**
- **How will you recruit your team members?**
- **Where will you find these specialists?**
- **With which persons will you collaborate?**
- **What is your relation to your previous mentors?**
- **Are you able to conduct research independently?**
- **In which way does your Host Institution support your project?**
- **Do you have enough lab space?**
- **What will you do if we decide not to fund this project?**

Principal Investigator (PI) questions

- **What will the grant mean for your personal development?**
- **You have already 5 PhD students and 2 Post-Docs... will the grant still help you to consolidate your independence?**

- Which are your most important papers? What was your contribution to these publications?
- Where do you see yourself in 5 years?
- What will be your standing once the project is finished?
- Why did you choose to work at this institution?
- How many students have you been supervising so far?
- What qualifies you to lead a team?
- Why haven't you published yet in Science, Nature, etc.?
- Why have you published only in national scientific journals?
- Your field Who are your main competitors (names, places)?
- Which other research groups are active in this field and why is your approach better?
- How do you see the future of your research field?
- How will your research results change this field?
- How can your results be useful for other disciplines?
- What are your contributions to your research field (so far)
- How do you assure that this project will be successful?
- How would you promote your Ph.D. students?

October 2022: Notification of results and funding/no funding decision

- Applicant received notification of B grade (possibly making him eligible for future Czech funding) and overall rejection of the proposal.
- Two weeks later, the applicant received the full evaluation report from the ERC. Below is a copy of this notification, provided for learning purposes, with identifying information removed.

From: ERC-2022-STG-APPLICANTS@ec.europa.eu <ERC-2022-STG-APPLICANTS@ec.europa.eu>

Sent: [DATE]

To: [CTU formal contact]

Subject: ERC 2022 StG call - Step 2 results - Proposal N° [X]

Importance: High

Dear [APPLICANT],

Following the Step 2 panel meetings of the ERC-2022-StG call, the review panels have made their final decision about proposals to be funded for this call.

Unfortunately your proposal has received the panel score 'B' and has not been selected for funding.

In about four/six weeks the official communication, containing all information related to the evaluation process together with an Evaluation Report (providing reviews and an overall panel

comment summarising the panel decision), will be uploaded on the [Funding & Tenders Portal](#) (F&T Portal). The full evaluation results will consist of a rejection letter, a letter from the ERC President and an Evaluation Report.

You will receive a notification from the [F&T Portal](#) as soon as the upload is completed. However, we advise you to check your account regularly. Please go to: My AREA and click on > My Proposals > Actions > Follow-up in order to access the evaluation result documents.

We kindly ask you and the host institution to not publicise this communication until you receive your official notification with the Evaluation Report.

In case you consider re-applying, you will find further information about the ERC-2023-StG call on the [F&T Portal](#) (call deadline 25 October 2022 17:00 Brussels time).

We thank you very much for your interest in the Starting Grant 2022 Call of the European Research Council and wish you every success in your research endeavours.

Best regards,

[NAME]

Call Coordinator

ERC-2022-STG

Please note that for this communication, the host institution representatives are contacted together with the applicants. If you are a representative of a host institution, this communication is for your information only; you do not need to contact applicants to inform them on the outcome of the selection process.

- As mentioned in the letter, a full Evaluation Report was sent to M. Below are non-private excerpts of this report, provided again for educational purposes for future applicants to see how the panels evaluate both the written application and the interview.

EVALUATION CRITERIA

Criterion 1 - RESEARCH PROJECT

Ground-breaking nature and potential impact of the research project

To what extent does the proposed research address important challenges?

To what extent are the objectives ambitious and beyond the state of the art (e.g. novel concepts and approaches or development between or across disciplines)?

To what extent is the proposed research high risk/high gain (i.e. if successful the payoffs will be very significant, but there is a high risk that the research project does not entirely fulfil its aims)?

Scientific Approach

To what extent is the outlined scientific approach feasible bearing in mind the extent that the proposed research is high risk/high gain?

To what extent are the proposed research methodology and working arrangements appropriate to achieve the goals of the project?

To what extent does the proposal involve the development of novel methodology?

To what extent are the proposed timescales, resources and PI commitment adequate and properly justified?

Criterion 2 - PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR

Intellectual capacity and creativity

The questions below can have one of the following five responses: Exceptional/Excellent/Very Good/Good/Non-competitive

To what extent has the PI demonstrated the ability to conduct ground-breaking research?

To what extent does the PI provide evidence of creative independent thinking?

To what extent does the PI have the required scientific expertise and capacity to successfully execute the project?

PANEL SCORE AND RANKING RANGE

Final panel score: B (meets some but not all elements of the ERC's excellence criterion and will not be funded)

Ranking range*: 57%-100%

For your information, only the top 32% of the proposals evaluated in panel PE8 in Step 2 were funded.

* Ranking range of your proposal out of the proposals evaluated by the panel in Step 2, in percent, from 1% for the highest ranked proposals to 100% for the lowest ranked.

PANEL COMMENT

This evaluation report contains the final recommendations and score awarded by the ERC review panel during the second step of the ERC Starting Grant review and the ranking range. The discussion of the panel was conducted within the context of prior reviews submitted by ERC panel members and external referees and the interview with the applicant.

The panel closely examined all the individual review reports and, while not necessarily subscribing to each and every opinion expressed, found that they provide a fair overall assessment. The comments of the individual reviewers are included in this report.

The presentation given by the applicant during the interview and the answers to the questions that were addressed greatly contributed to build the panel's view about the proposal's strengths and weaknesses.

Both the individual reviews and the interview were the basis for the discussion and the final recommendation of the panel.

The panel considers that the PI has appropriate knowledge and background related to the project. The panel also acknowledges that the PI has a good publication track record in computational modelling and related science.

The panel considered that the project is of significant interest. During the presentation, the PI described the mathematical model required for characterising strain dependent surface and surface instability modelling of soft materials. The panel was not convinced with the PI's response regarding non-linear and viscoelastic behaviour of soft materials and its non-inclusion in mathematical model. The panel considers that the details about the model characterising parameters and its experimental validation were not sufficiently elaborated. The panel considers that the project's novelty was not fully demonstrated.

The panel therefore does not recommend the proposal for funding.

General panel details and consensus evaluation

This general information was followed by detailed Reviewer commentaries (8 commentaries in total), in this structure for each review:

Research Project

- Ground-breaking nature and potential impact of the research project
(text commentary by reviewer/panel member)
- Scientific Approach
(text commentary by reviewer)

Principal Investigator

- To what extent has the PI demonstrated the ability to conduct ground-breaking research?
(Good, Very Good, Excellent, or Exceptional ranking by reviewer/panel member)
- To what extent does the PI provide evidence of creative independent thinking?
(Good, Very Good, Excellent, or Exceptional ranking)
- To what extent does the PI have the required scientific expertise and capacity to successfully execute the project?
(Good, Very Good, Excellent, or Exceptional ranking)

Comments (Optional for reviewers)

(text commentary by reviewer)

- My colleague at CTU shared the reviews, with M's approval, with the mock interview committee members mentioned above. One of these experts provided the following advice to M.

It is a pity that the proposal was not selected for funding.

Without knowing the

- *reviews (which are written prior before the interview), and*
- *panel comments collected by the subset of panel members who saw the presentation*

I would generally recommend applying again. The topic is good, the scientific merit is there, and [APPLICANT] is capable of doing a high-quality research. Is there a minimum time delay requested before applying if the mark is B? Will [APPLICANT] still be young enough to apply for STG type of project?

The review comments are the uncorrected comments written by the panelist and reviewers before the interview. Therefore, they are very useful - they are not the result of some consensual discussion. It is the raw opinion of individuals. APPLICANT

- *will not see the marks for the research project (both nature and approach have separate marks visible only to the panel).*
- *He will only see the marks for himself – evaluation of the PI.*

The panel comments contain introductory and outro sentences common to all applicants. Not needed. Only the central part must be read. But it is a consensual, edited and repeatedly corrected diplomatic statement, which is not exhaustive and is influenced by the emotions during the presentation and Q/A session.

1/ If the reviews are positive and panel comments are cold, the panelists (who had high expectations) were disappointed by the interview. The panel comments may not reflect the opinion of external reviewers who were not present and whose questions were not understood or sufficiently represented by the panelists.

It also may not reflect the opinion of all panelists present at the interview because only one panelist is the „lead reviewer“ responsible for composing the panel comment. The others only check the panel comments quickly because they primarily focus on their panel comments on other projects for which they serve as lead reviewers. In such a case, the B1 and B2 were better (more promising) than the appearance during the presentation.

2/ If the reviews were already with reservations, [APPLICANT] must read what the weaknesses were and improve B1, B2 substantially.

I will keep my fingers crossed!

November 2022: Public announcements of ERC Starting Grant results


- Notifications about ERC Starting Grants were made public. Below is a screenshot of a Czech new interview on the three candidates in the Czech Republic who received funding in this round (my CTU colleague shared this with me).


vedavyzkum.cz/z-domova/z-domova/erc-starting-grants-2022-v-cesku-uspely-tri-vedkyne

ch National Libr... NTK Národní technická... ea W Science and Civilisa... Suchergebnis auf A... Jan Zeman Calendar Openmechanics Poznámky k webu ~...

ERC Starting Grants 2022: v Česku uspely tři vědkyně

22. 11. 2022 [Tisk](#) [Email](#)

 V letošním ročníku ERC Starting Grants byly úspěšné tři projekty z Česka. Prestižním grantem Evropská výzkumná rada letos podpoří Johanu Wyss z Etnologického ústavu Akademie věd ČR, Erin Carson z Matematicko-fyzikální fakulty Univerzity Karlovy a Madalinu B. Moraru z Právnické fakulty Masarykovy univerzity.



[Data z CERN bude i v další etapě přenášet český CESNET](#)

[Průlomová metoda z Akademie věd ČR změní světový výzkum genomů](#)

[Výzkumně-vývojové centrum společnosti Contipro je podnikatelským projektem roku](#)

[Prezentace výstupů projektu Potenciál migrace](#)

[Agentura CzechInvest slaví 30 let svého fungování](#)

[Studentští delegáti z pětaticeti zemí jednají v Praze](#)

[Moraru, Erin Carson, Johana Wyss](#)

<https://vedavyzkum.cz/z-domova/z-domova/erc-starting-grants-2022-v-cesku-uspely-tri-vedkyne>

The three successful ERC Starting Grant candidates in the Czech Republic in 2022.