ERC Interviews Webinar

Guidance on the Interviews stage of evaluation and how to prepare

European Research Council

8 September 2021

erc-uk@ukro.ac.uk

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Who is who

Presenter

- Sean Rowlands – European Advisor and ERC National Contact Point

Moderator

- Dr Phil Holliday – European Advisor and ERC National Contact Point

What will be covered in this webinar?

- What the interview stage is for

- Rules of engagement

- Technical aspects

- Preparation tips for your interview

- Short break

- Questions and answers session

Housekeeping

- All participants will be muted for the duration of the webinar.

- A chat function is available and will be monitored.

- Please use the Q&A function to submit questions.

- You can 'up vote' your favourite questions.

- We will be recording this session.

- Slides will be shared after the webinar on the event page.

About UKRO

Mission

- Maximise UK engagement in EU-funded research, innovation and higher education activities

Our office

- Based in Brussels
- EU office of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI)
- Delivers subscription-based advisory services for around 140 research organisations in the UK and beyond

Horizon Europe National Contact Point for

- European Research Council (ERC)- erc-uk@ukro.ac.uk
- Marie Sklowdowska Curie Actions (MSCA) - mariecurie-uk@ukro.ac.uk

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Sources of Further Information on UK participation

- UKRO website provides latest information on UK participation in European Programme incl. ERC

- The official statements on the EU-UK relationship
  - European Commission website
  - UK Government website.

- UK Government provides information on EU Funded Programmes under the Withdrawal Agreement.

- Turing scheme for students to study and work abroad - new UK programme replacing Erasmus+
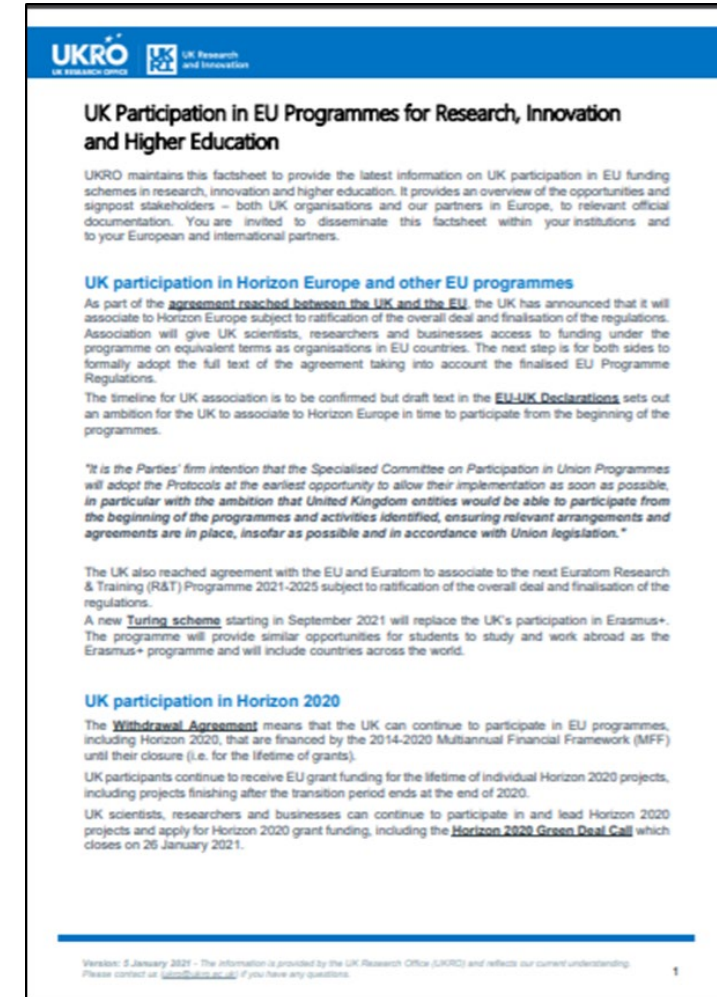
What the interview stage is for

How do they fit into the evaluation process and how can they help or hinder applicants?

What does the interview consist of?

PI Presentation
to the Evaluation Panel
about their proposal

Q&A session
Panellists asking the PI questions
about their proposal

Around 30 minutes duration

Length of the presentation and Q&A may vary between panels

Correction on overall interview slot duration:
During the webinar, our understanding was that the overall duration of all interviews was set to 30 minutes.
Since then we have clarified that there is no strict ERC rule and some panels have adjusted the overall duration of interviews above or below 30 minutes.
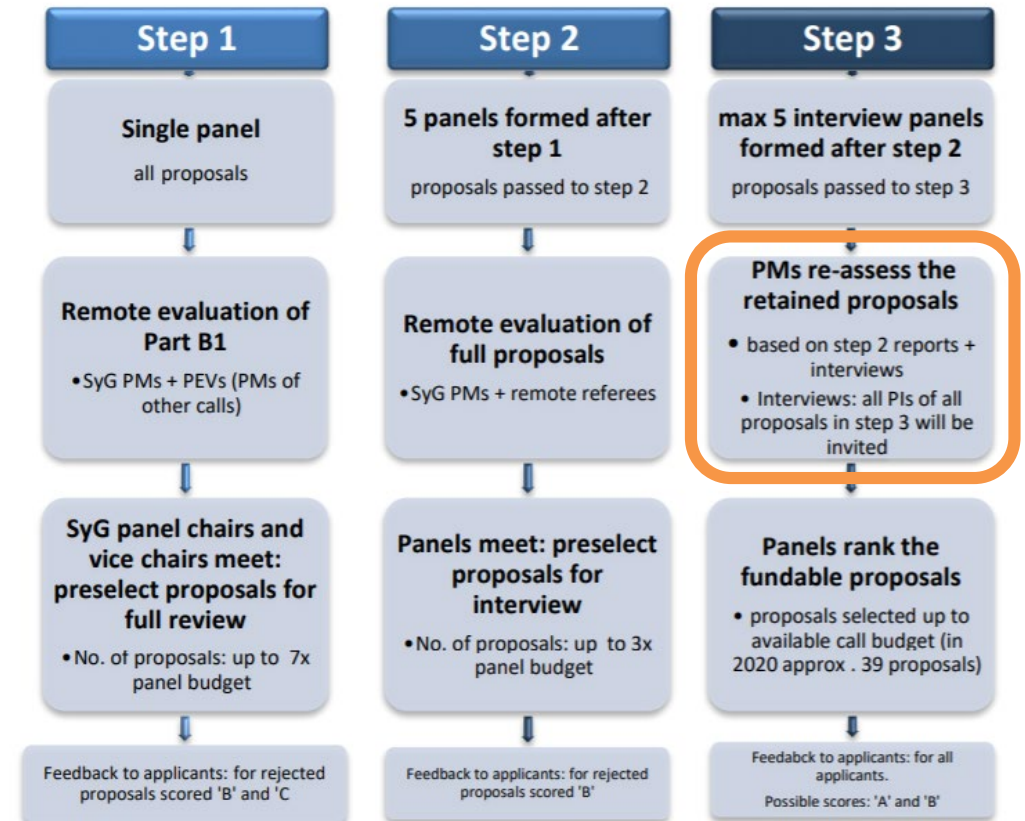*Remember the definitive timeslot for an applicant's interview will be stated on their invitation documents*

Where do interviews fit into overall ERC evaluation processes?

Step 2 of StG, CoG & AdG calls
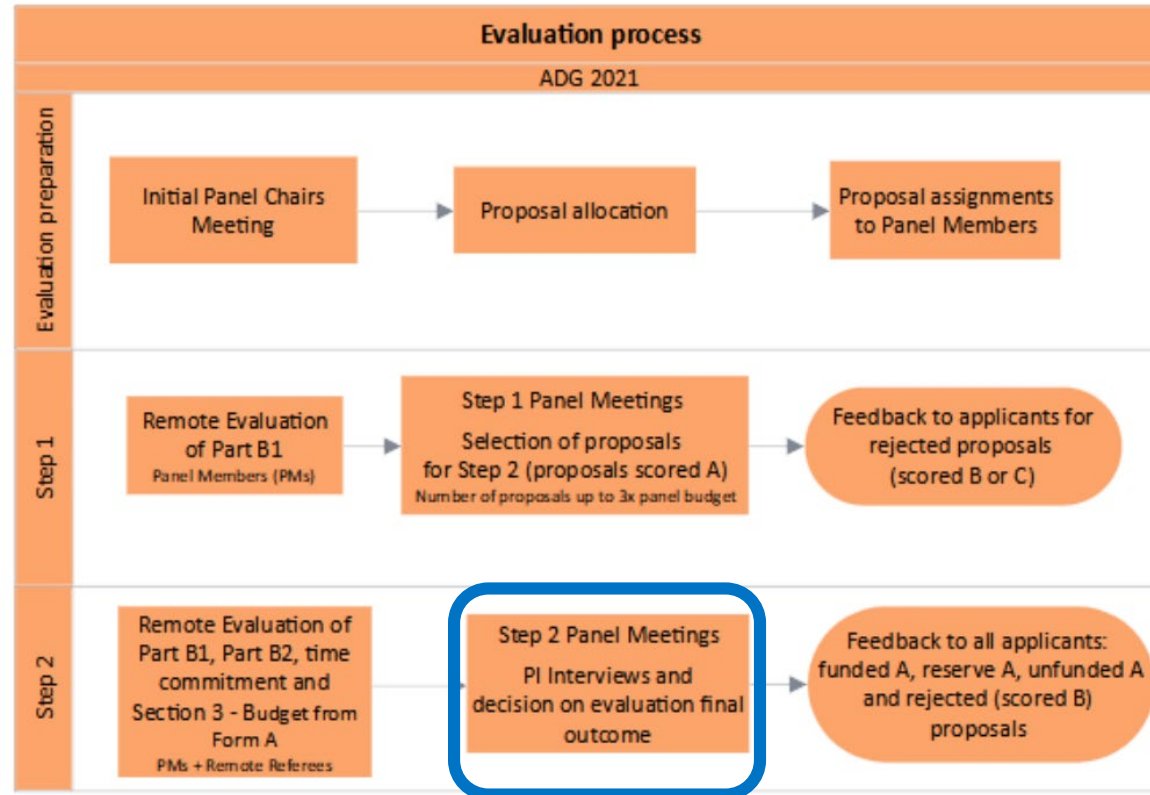
Step 3 of Synergy calls

These diagrams are copied from ERC Call Information for Applicants documents

What are the assessment criteria for the interview?

The same Excellence criteria that apply to your written proposal

Research Project

- Ground-breaking nature, ambition and feasibility
- Scientific Approach

Principal Investigator

- Intellectual capacity and creativity
- Group synergy (only for Synergy Grant application which have 2-4 PIs)

Different ERC Principal Investigator Profiles

Interviewees will be evaluated with different benchmarks based on Starting, Consolidator, Advanced Grantee profiles.

Intellectual capacity and creativity

Starting and Consolidator

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?

Intellectual capacity and creativity

Advanced and Synergy

To what extent has/have the PI(s) demonstrated the ability to conduct ground-breaking research?

To what extent does/do the PI(s) has/have the required scientific expertise and capacity to successfully execute the project?

To what extent has the PI demonstrated sound leadership in the training and advancement of young scientists (*for Advanced Grant applicants*)?

Synergy Grant Group

Synergy

To what extent does the Synergy Grant Group successfully demonstrate in the proposal that it brings together the know-how – such as skills, experience, expertise, disciplines, teams – necessary to address the proposed research question (based on the Extended Synopsis)?

The best description of your profile is in the Information for Applicants for your specific call.

We strongly recommend you measure yourself against the guidance profile throughout your interview preparation.

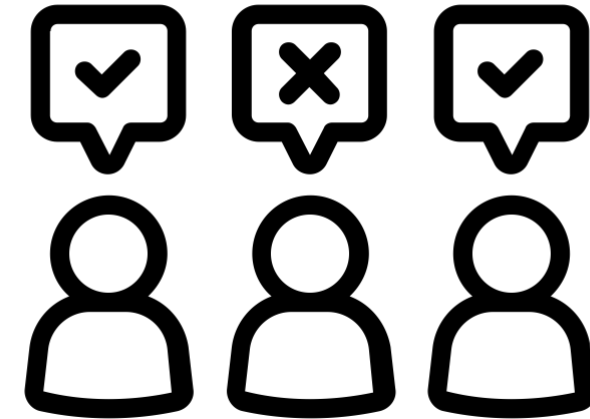These profiles above are taken from the ERC 2022 Work Programme.

Rules of engagement

Who is involved, how much time is available, what aspects might come up and proper use of slides

Who is involved in the interview?

The Principal Investigator(s)

All Synergy Group PIs must attend together.
A colleague cannot attend on the PI's behalf.

The Evaluation Panel

1 panel chair and ~11 - 17 panellists.

They have each read the interviewee's full proposal
(B1, B2, Budget and Justification of resources.)

Do not expose the identities of the panellists,
they must remain anonymous until the evaluation process of your call has ended.

Who are on the panel?

1 x PANEL CHAIR

- **Role:** Organises the work within their panel and attends the final consolidation meeting.
- **Identity known:** published by the ERCEA ahead of the submission deadline

~11 - 17 PANEL MEMBERS

- **Role:** Assists in the preparation of panel meetings and contributes individual evaluation of proposals, usually remotely.
- **Anonymous:** identities only published by ERCEA after the evaluation process has ended.

Profile

World leading experts in their field carefully selected by the ERC.

Any nationality and based anywhere in the world.

Generalist panel: some may be close to a an interviewee's field, others may be unfamiliar with it.

Disciplinary expertise

The best fit panel, chosen by the applicant in their proposal based on keywords in call guidance.

For Synergy Grants the panels are dynamically composed with a mix that matches each specific proposal.

Interdisciplinarity can be addressed by reallocating a proposal to another panel or involving a panellist from a secondary panel.

Balance

Balanced composition of the evaluation panels is ensured by the ERC Executive agency.

Particular attention given to gender balance and geographical diversity

Other factors they try to balance: skills, experience, knowledge, etc.

Rotation of panellists

Panellists usually contracted 2 years before call deadline

ERCEA's usual approach is to change panellists each year.

Biannual rotation

Each Panel member typically limited to serving four terms over an eight-year-period.

What is fair game for discussion?

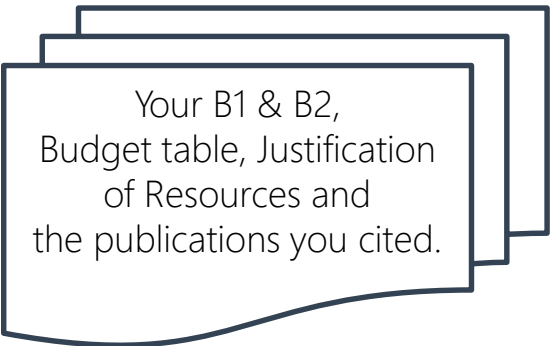| The project idea	High risk/high gain	Your role as PI	Your team	The budget

The work plan and feasibility	Remote reviewer comments	What is included/not included in the proposal

Panellist will come with the following to the interview:

Your B1 & B2, Budget table, Justification of Resources and the publications you cited.

The remote reviewer's comments – chosen for their subject expertise in your proposal's field of research

Their initial judgments and early discussions from Stage 1

That year's ERC Work Programme and that call's Guidance for Peer Reviewers

Remote interviews

If coronavirus restrictions keep lifting, interviewees will participate remotely for the foreseeable future but panellists will be together, on-site from November

"Scientific Council envisages that as from November 2021 panel meetings are held with panel members on-site and candidates [...] joining the interview remotely."

ERC Coronavirus Business Continuity Measures

2021 Starting Grant Interviews (October 2021)
- Remote Panel
- Remote Interviewee

2021 Consolidator Grant interviews (January 2022)
- Panel on-site in Brussels
- Remote Interviewee

2021 Advanced Grant Interviews (Feb/Mar 2022)
- Panel on-site in Brussels
- Remote Interviewee

ERC's remote evaluation have worked well so far:
- Remote evaluations since March 2020

- 4 major calls were evaluated on schedule during that time.

- 2 rounds of remote interviews: the 2020 Consolidator and 2020 Synergy Grant calls.

- The major detriment of remote evaluations has been the interaction between panellists.

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How a panel can customise their interviews

How long can the slide presentation be?

How long can the Q&A be?

How many slides are allowed in the presentation?

Are **video clips** allowed as part of the presentation?

Are **slide animations** allowed?

Are **back-up slides*** allowed?

How many back-up slides are allowed?

***"Back-up slides are slides that you will not show in your presentation but would like to display in case you want to underline a point during the Q&A session."*

5 - 12 July:
Starting Grant 2021 interviewees should have received the instructions from their panel via the EC Funding and Tenders Portal.

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Technical aspects

How is the ERC running remote interviews?

Scheduling and logistics of the interview

- Initial invitation asks applicants to block out a week for their interview.

- A notification of the specific date and time in that week will be sent to the applicant at a later point.

- Applicants are requested to be available for the entire duration of their interview slot.

- They should connect 5 minutes before their time slot using the link to the Webex session that will be sent by email around two to three weeks before the interview.
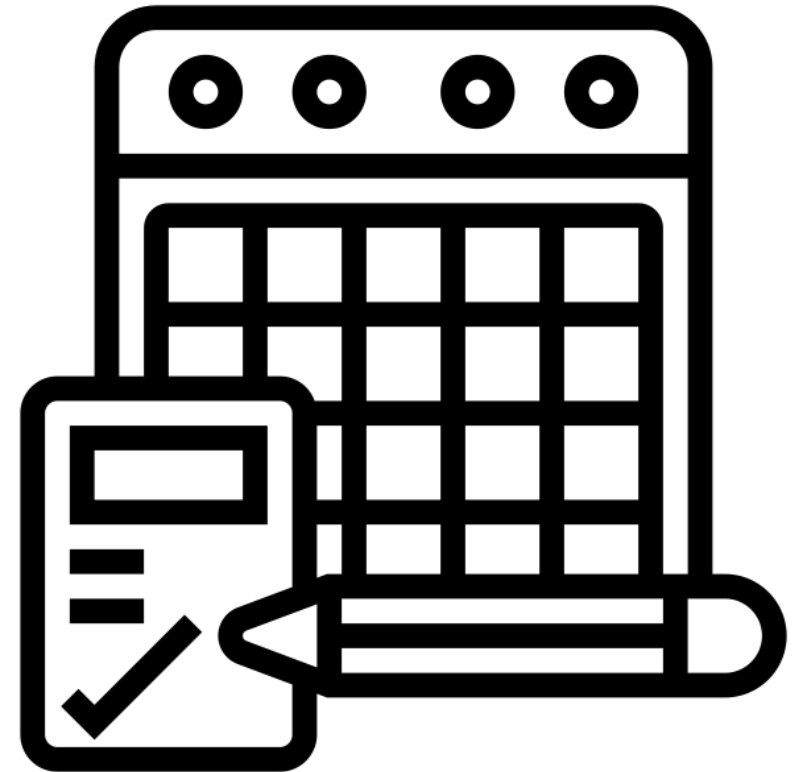
Created by Eucalyp
from Noun Project

Correction

Selected interviewees for the 2021 Starting Grant call have all received invitations by now.

Consolidator grant call interview invitations will be sent in October 2021.

(During the webinar it was incorrectly stated on these slides that Consolidator interview invitations had been sent out already)

Technical setup for remote interviews

VIDEO CALL SOFTWARE

Remote interviews will use **Cisco Webex**

ERC invitation includes Annex II: Webex guidelines

Applicants are advised to thoroughly test and familiarise themselves with the tool using the link provided in their invitation.

PANEL RULES

Each panel can have different rules and specifications for how the remote interview will run.

These rules are communicated ahead of the interview

More on this later in today's webinar.

SLIDES

All panels are expected to allow some form of presentation.

PDF version of the slides should be sent ahead of the interview - so that panellists can read if there are technical issues with the slideshow.

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Using the Webex video call platform

A few pointers...

- Webex is very similar to Zoom or MS Teams but not exactly the same.
You should practise to get used to it.

- The ERC has been using Webex for some time

- You can connect via the web platform but **the downloaded app platform works better.**

- ERC asked interviewees to provide their **mobile phone number to be used as a Plan B** if Webex doesn't work.
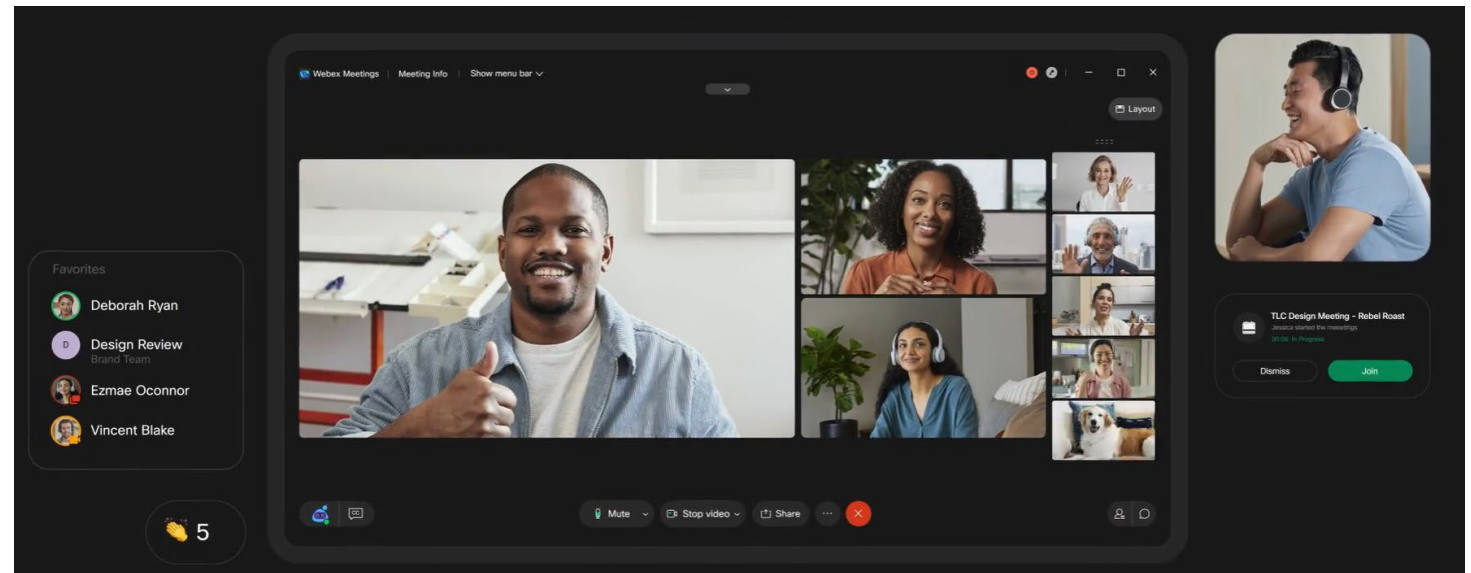
If you aren't familiar with how Webex works, or you are having trouble using it, you can look up video tutorials while you are testing out the platform – like this one for example

If you encounter technical issues you cannot resolve…

You can let the ERC know **by the date indicated in their invitation letter** using this mailbox:

ERC-B-EVAL-IT-SUPPORT@ec.europa.eu

(Include a short description and/or screenshots of the issue)

"The ERC will do their best to help you to solve the issue, however they cannot guarantee that every technical issue on the interviewee side will be solved."

No test calls are organised for upcoming interviews

(as was done for the previous 2020 CoG call.)

Preparation tips for your interview

Planning your presentation, your response to questions and practising with interview conditions.

Designing your presentation

Think about the **narrative** you want to tell!

- Tell a story about your exciting project, your track record and your capacity to carry out the project.

- Do not duplicate/overexplain what the panel have read already in your proposal, CV and cited publications.

- Don't waste time reading out text on your slide, make sure they can read it while you are speaking

Have **clear and representative slides** and focus on the research!

- Include text & images that complement your performance.

- Less is more – too much information can easily become overwhelming and counterproductive.

- Arrange text and images on the slide in positions and sizes that help to guide the panellists' eye through the information, with enough space to be easily understood.

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Practicing and Mock Interviews

We would recommend you plan in a schedule of as many mock interviews and practice sessions as possible

The interview could define whether or not you are successful, so why not polish your content and performance as best you can!

- **Simulate real interview conditions:** as closely as you can in at least some of the sessions (e.g. 30 minute time limit, using WebEx, with a large generalist panel etc.)

- **Assemble a variety of panellists and try to cater for all of them:** combination of familiar and unfamiliar with your field, variety of cultures/mother tongues, gender balance, rude/friendly, enthusiastic/skeptical etc.

- **Always discuss feedback after the simulation/re-watch recordings:** use this to make marginal gains and anticipate what might happen in the real interview. Then practise again!

Anticipate Questions and Practice Your Responses

How might questions differ during your session?

- The questions could differ if they are posed by someone who is familiar with your field of research,
- or from someone who is unfamiliar.
- Different cultural backgrounds might mean that a question is posed differently
- Different levels of enthusiasm

How will you react to different questions?

- Practice offensive/misguided questions so that you can respond calmly if such a question comes up during the interview.
- Time your responses to questions to identify which areas you need to practice and reduce down to essentials.

How detailed will some questions be?

- Be familiar with your work plan so that you can respond to detailed questions concisely.
- If your panel allows backup slides to help explain yourself, practice how you will use them.
- Or practice how you will respond if a question is very general or vague

Possible Q&A questions – ideas in your proposal

Concepts in your proposal:
- Requests for clarification,
- Ask you to respond to a doubt
- Explain why you chose them
- Explain how they fit together or into the bigger picture

Etc...

Novelty
- What exactly is new about what is proposed?
- What about this research you haven't mentioned?

Etc...

Missing element
- Concept
- In your scientific approach
- In your team
- In the equipment/field work you plan to do
- In your outputs

Etc...

Methodology:
- How exactly will task X work?
- Why aren't you including X in your scientific approach?
- Are you sure you have enough people in your team to carry out what you propose
- Explain how you plan to use the evidence at this stage
- What about the gender dimension?

Etc...

Possible Q&A questions – how the project will work

Principal Investigator
- Why are you the best person to lead this project?
- How can you do X when you only commit this much time?
- What about your track record suggests you can carry out task X?
- Do you have the know-how to do this part alone?

Etc...

Budget
- Your team, your equipment, your time commitment etc.
- Not enough costed for X, too much costed for Y
- Panel may even want to discuss potential adjustments to your budget

Etc...

Work plan
- Why this before that?
- Not enough time to realistically achieve x
- Why aren't you planning in meetings for this phase?
- How will you mitigate risk at this stage?

Etc...

Your team
- Why are you the best person to lead this project?
- How will you ensure you are communicating with and supporting your team?
- Explain your justification for x team members
- Why don't you have admin support?

Etc...

Possible Q&A questions – different perspectives on your proposal

Non-specialist queries

- I am in a different field from you, so I don't fully understand this approach and how it works.

- I thought this might be a problem. Could you explain it to me in a way I might better understand please?

- Why is this expensive specialised equipment necessary in your project?

Etc…

Specialist queries

- "The remote expert review said X, how do you respond?"

- "This school of thought would do this differently, why should we fund your approach?"

- "I have worked in this field for a long time but I'm not quite convinced by x…."

- "Your idea is very exciting but I haven't quite understood how you overcome y"

- Wouldn't you need this specialised equipment?

Etc…

Testimonials and advice from successful ERC applicants and ERC panellists

Quotes from successful ERC grantees

"My impression from this interview was that they were trying to ask me friendly questions and trying to help me not trip me up"

"I was very reassured that I was allowed to have backup slides with my research objectives just in case my mind went blank."

"One of the things we did early on was to set up a series of practice interviews, which as one of our reviewers said was sometimes disastrous."

"Ask the panel 'did that answer your question', otherwise it's straight to the next question from someone else and at least it reassured me that the person was satisfied."

"Think of it as a TED talk – so start with a personal anecdote."

I think it is really difficult to have an interview with a group of people working remotely, or just in general, know everyone wants to speak, everyone has an idea of what we want to say it was really genuinely very challenging.

"The proposal and the reviewer comments got us to the point of having the interview but I think was really important in getting the success."

"It seemed to me like a foregone conclusion in the interview, I think they had already decided it would be funded."

Typical reasons for rejection

Typical Reasons for Rejection – Project criteria

- Scope: Too narrow or too broad/unfocussed
- Incremental research – not ambitious enough
- Work plan not detailed enough/unclear
- Insufficient risk management

The assessment will be based on the published ERC excellence criteria and the panellists are well-briefed to follow these.

There are no hidden expectations although the criteria is quite broad so the expert panellists are given quite a lot of freedom in their assessment

Reasons for Rejection - Principal Investigator criteria *

- Insufficient track-record
- Insufficient potential for independence/demonstration of independence/demonstration of leadership
- Insufficient experience in leading projects
- Unconvincing mix in the Synergy Grant Group

Remember: evaluations are made on the basis of a Starting, Consolidator or Advanced Grantee profiles – check your interview plan against the call guidance documents

Don't forget to follow the correct ERC PI Profiles

Intellectual capacity and creativity

Starting and Consolidator

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

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Synergy Grant Group

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The boxes above are taken from the ERC 2022 Work Programme.

Any questions?

If you have any follow up questions after watching the webinar and looking through these slides, please contact the UK ERC National Contact Point:

erc-uk@ukro.ac.uk

Short break

Still time to add questions for the Q&A session after the break

You can 'up vote' your favourite questions listed already to give them a better chance of being answered.

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Any questions?

Please use the Q&A function to submit questions

You can 'up vote' your favourite questions.

We may not have time to respond to every question but we will try to address a broad variety.