Transition of the ERC to Horizon Europe

Operational considerations

17 December 2019

The ERC’s mission and funding principles have been fully maintained by the European Union (EU) Parliament and Council during the negotiations on Horizon Europe, the successor programme to Horizon 2020. The ERC Scientific Council acknowledges this fact with satisfaction as it is in line with its position paper\(^1\) on that matter. Consequently, it is working to ensure a smooth transition of the ERC to Horizon Europe, which is expected to start in January 2021 and cover the period until the end of 2027.

With this information note, the ERC Scientific Council is sharing its tentative planning for the 2021-2022 ERC calls for proposals. This note also presents some of the main novelties it is considering to introduce in its effort to continuously ensure world-class peer review evaluation. These adjustments are part of a broader reflection and adaptation process engaging both the Scientific Council and the ERC Executive Agency, the Dedicated Implementation Structure serving the ERC. This process is expected to continue in the coming years.

Planning of 2021-2022 calls for proposals

As in previous transitions between consecutive EU research and innovation framework programmes, the calendar of the calls in the initial year of Horizon Europe may differ from the calendar of 2020 calls for proposals.

All mono-beneficiary ERC calls (Starting, Consolidator and Advanced Grants) are expected to be launched in 2021 and 2022, but their opening and closing dates will be shifted so that the first calls will be launched only in January 2021. The Scientific Council expects the call schedule to be back to the usual opening and closing timeframes by mid-2022.

The modified planning will likely not include a Synergy Grant call in the ERC Work Programme 2021. This call will probably be included again in the Work Programme 2022. The Scientific Council’s intention is to launch this call in the summer of 2021 with a deadline in November of the same year.

Any shift in the calls timetable is not expected to affect the eligibility periods of candidates applying for ERC Starting and Consolidator Grants. These eligibility periods are based on the time elapsed between the date of the first PhD of the applicant and the 1st of January of the budget year to which the Work Programme refers. The possibility to extend these eligibility periods in individual cases for specific reasons, as established in previous work programmes, is expected to be retained.

ERC panel structure

The Scientific Council continues its mandate to ensure a world-class peer review system based on fully transparent, fair and impartial treatment of all proposals. Therefore, it is planning to introduce several changes to the structure of the ERC evaluation panels, which are laid out in the work programmes year after year. As science constantly evolves, such a revision process is constantly ongoing. The
Scientific Council continuously monitors the balance between panels in terms of the number of proposals assessed in each call, the disciplinary coherence within and across panels, and the place of interdisciplinary research in the panel structure.

This monitoring has pointed to the urgency of reviewing the panel structure in all three domains but in different ways, and with no prejudice to the fully bottom-up nature of the ERC calls for proposals.

With regards to the Social Sciences and Humanities (SH) and the Physical Sciences & Engineering (PE) domains, application patterns have led the Scientific Council to introduce two new panels:

- A new SH panel (SH7) entitled “Human Mobility, Environment and Space” is expected to be introduced to cover research in the fields of human geography, demography, health, sustainability science, territorial planning and spatial analysis; its descriptors will be largely drawn from the descriptors of previous panels as laid out in Work Programme 2020;

- A new PE panel (PE11) entitled “Materials Engineering” is expected to be introduced, for research relating to “Advanced materials development: performance enhancement, modelling, large-scale preparation, modification, tailoring, optimisation, novel and combined use of materials, etc.”. Its descriptors will largely be drawn from the descriptors of previous PE panels as laid out in Work Programme 2020.

Concerning research in the Life Sciences (LS) domain, the unequal share of applications to different panels and the emergence of projects covering multiple fields of research crossing different panels has led the Scientific Council to redefine the contours of the panels and enrich their descriptors.

The panel structure that the Scientific Council expects to be in place for the new calls in 2021 is available here.
ERC Advanced Grant evaluation

The Scientific Council has decided to align the ERC Advanced Grant evaluation process with the processes used for the Starting and Consolidator Grant calls by introducing interviews of applicants in Step 2 of the evaluation.

The Scientific Council felt indeed that ERC Advanced Grant candidates should be given the opportunity to defend their proposals with panel members in an interview. This will also enable panel members to probe proposals more deeply by means of a direct exchange with applicants.