



European Research Council  
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# Measures taken by Widening countries to improve success in ERC calls

Over the past decade, several Widening countries have introduced targeted measures to strengthen their research systems and improve their performance in ERC competitions. These efforts generally focus on two areas: supporting individual applicants and strengthening the wider research environment.

The examples below show the range of approaches taken, from hands-on support for researchers to longer-term investments in institutions. They may offer useful ideas that others can adapt to their own context.

## Direct support to potential and current ERC applicants

### 1. Pre-application support

Successful programmes provide structured mentoring and preparation in advance of ERC calls with the aim to raise the quality of submitted proposals.

- **Czechia:** The national Expert Group for Supporting ERC Applicants encourages researchers to engage in one to two years of mentoring before applying. The Expert Group is supported by several Czech Universities and provides all mentoring services. [Expert group](#)
- **Cyprus:** The Research and Innovation Foundation (RIF) offers grants of up to **€100,000** to help researchers conduct preparatory research that will underpin their ERC proposals.
- **Portugal:** Through the **ERC-Portugal Programme**, managed by the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT), applicants can have their proposals **pre-assessed by a peer review panel** composed of former ERC panel members. [ERC-Portugal Program - FCT](#)

These initiatives rely on **ERC grantees, former panel members, and experienced researchers** as mentors, rather than commercial consultants. Ideally, they make sure that only the most competitive applicants participate in ERC calls. Mentoring activities include discussing scientific ideas, analysing successful ERC proposals, drafting applications, and preparing for ERC interviews.

### 2. Post-application support

Several countries have established mechanisms to assist applicants with **unfunded but high-quality ERC proposals** in resubmitting improved proposals.

- **Portugal:** The FCT provides grants for **€250,000 (36 months)** to support unfunded ERC proposals (“ERC As”) in preparing resubmissions. [ERC-Portugal Program - FCT](#)

- **Lithuania:** Since 2022, EU Member States can transfer up to 5% of their European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) allocation to other EU instruments, including Horizon Europe. Lithuania redirected **€18.5 million** of ERDF funding to support **unfunded but positively evaluated Horizon Europe proposals**, including ERC applications. In 2024, the Lithuanian government signed an agreement with the ERC to finance a Consolidator Grant (CoG 2024) using ERDF funds.

### 3. Bridge funding for resubmission

Some Widening countries offer **bridge grants** to help unsuccessful applicants strengthen their research and reapply.

- **Czechia:** The government's *Active* programme funds ERC applicants who received a "B" at Step 2. Applicants must resubmit their ERC proposal within two years. Between 2012 and 2020, 26 projects received a total of **CZK 938.7 million**.
- **Estonia:** The *Mobilitas Plus* programme provides up to **€100,000 per year for up to 1.5 years** to unsuccessful ERC applicants, to cover their research and study visits to ERC grantees. [Supporting the ERC applications - Estonian Research Council](#)
- **Lithuania:** ERC applicants who received a "B" at Step 2 can apply for grants of up to **€150,000 for 18 months** to enhance their research profile and methodology. To date, three applicants have received a total of **€450,000** under this scheme.
- **Slovenia:** The Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency annually funds applicants who received a "B" in Step 1 or reached Step 2 without funding, enabling them to revise and resubmit their projects.

## Creating a conducive research environment

### 1. Research infrastructure

Investment in high-quality research infrastructure has been a critical factor in building the competitiveness of applications to ERC.

- **Czechia:** the government has used the EU Structural Funds to strengthen R&D capacity in universities and research institutes. A flagship example is the **Central European Institute of Technology (CEITEC)** in Brno, which offers world-class facilities and hosts several national and international ERC grantees. [CEITEC - výzkumné centrum](#)
- **Lithuania:** thanks to EU Structural Funds, Vilnius University has been able to build a state-of-the-art centre for education and training in life sciences, together with advanced research in biochemistry and related fields. The **Life Sciences Centre** hosts most ERC grantees in Lithuania. [Life Sciences Center](#)
- **Bulgaria:** the government has committed approximately **€85 million** over a ten-year period to fund the INSAIT (Institute for Computer Science, Artificial Intelligence and Technology) at Sophia University. The institute was founded in 2022 in partnership with Switzerland's ETH Zurich and EPFL, and is the first of its kind in Eastern Europe. It offers world-class research facilities and conditions. INSAIT can pay competitive salaries for all faculty so they can recruit globally. . [INSAIT | Institute for Computer Science, Artificial Intelligence and Technology.](#)

## 2. Career support and stability

Some countries have introduced legislative and institutional reforms to ensure stable research careers and greater autonomy for research bodies. For example:

- **Slovenia:** The **Scientific Research and Innovation Activities Act (2021)** established a modern legal framework for research and innovation, granting public research organisations greater autonomy and providing stable funding for research and new institutions.
- **Portugal:** The **ERC-PT Careers Programme**, launched by the FCT in 2021 and funded by the EU Recovery and Resilience Plan, aims to attract foreign ERC grantees to permanent positions in Portuguese institutions and to stabilise the careers of ERC grantees already working in Portugal. [ERC-Portugal Program - FCT](#)

## 3. Recruitment of international researchers

- **Lithuania:** The government has introduced measures to attract international researchers and highly skilled professionals. Under the *“Attracting and Reintegration of Brains – SMART”* programme, Lithuanians returning from abroad and foreign researchers who have moved to Lithuania less than 12 months before receive grants of up to **€1 million** to conduct research in Lithuanian institutions. [LMT tyreju lankstinukas EN](#)

## 4. Internationalisation and talent development

Efforts to strengthen international networks, promote exchange, and fund top national talent complement direct ERC-support measures.

- **Slovakia:** The **National Scholarship Programme (NSP)** and **MoRePro (Mobility and Reintegration Programme)** facilitate international exchanges and attract high-level researchers to Slovak institutions. [National Scholarship Programme - Home](#); [SAS - MoRePro](#)
- **Portugal:** The **Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation** provides **fellowships and “New Talents” scholarships** for outstanding students and researchers, supporting international collaboration and exposure to leading research environments. Competitive national programmes such as **FCT Investigator** and **Stimulus to Scientific Employment** identify and fund top researchers through open calls, fostering internal competition and excellence.  
[Bolsa Gulbenkian Gulbenkian New Talents Scholarships – Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian Individual Scientific Position - FCT](#)  
[Individual Call to Scientific Employment Stimulus - 8th Edition - FCT](#)