

ERC applications from an evaluator's (and grantholder's) perspective

Poul Nissen, Prof. Protein Biochemistry
Dept. Molecular Biology and Genetics/iNANO, AU

Director: DG Centre for Membrane Pumps in Cells and Disease – **PUMPkin** (2007-17)

ERC Advanced Research Program **BIOMEMOS** (2010-15)

Director: Danish Research Institute for Translational Neuroscience – **DANDRITE** (2013-18-23) - Nordic-EMBL Partnership for Molecular Medicine

Co-founder **Pcovery Aps** (2009-)

PhD 1993-1997 (AU, Jens Nyborg)
Postdoc 1997-2000 (Yale, Tom Steitz)
Ole Rømer stipend 2001-2005 (AU)
Assoc. Prof. 2002, professor 2006 (AU)

ERC Life Science Panel 1 in 2011
External review 2012-13

How are ERC applications different?

- A chance to propose a long-term, independent and risk-taking project with novel and original scope
- Focus on excellence
- Very high visibility – win-win for recipient, colleagues and host
- Evaluations are *very* thorough and honest
- Large panels – applications will be very well covered by the expertise of the panel
- CV and proposal are actually read, not “measured”
- Bibliometrics is not an issue per se – competence, quality, novelty and originality are key
- The review panel members have a very big job

Who and how are the panels?

- Experts of the subsection
 - ERC panel invitations are prestigious assignments and well-paid, the very best researchers will be present
 - They are all very experienced in science evaluation
 - They will consider it an honor to serve on the panel
 - They will easily get excited and be forgiving
 - They will easily become grumpy and resistant
 - The panels act through hard work and scholar discussions and the experts expect that of each-other
 - As a panel participant one should allocate at least 1 month for the year
 - Panel members expect to be inspired and learn from the proposals

What is being scored and evaluated?

- Round 1
 - *Intellectual capacity, creativity and commitment of the PI (CV)*
 - *Ground-breaking nature and potential impact of the research; methodology (proposal)*
 - Both important
- Round 2
 - The above at further depth and on a shorter list
 - Feasibility, plan and resources of the project – well-considered, independent
 - Originality and novelty of the proposal – ground-breaking?
 - Commitment of the applicant
- Interview
 - Capacity, motivation and drive of the applicant
 - Reflection on the panel's questions, doubts and criticism

The overall idea

- Original and well-qualified - make the reviewer wonder on a good question
- Convince the panel that this is your new idea for ERC
- Exciting perspectives, include also derived, applied research
- Robust or cutting-edge technology can both work, depending on the question
- Homework must be done
 - Consider different ideas and collections of ideas that form a good ERC proposal
 - Check available literature and if similar approaches/questions have been covered already
 - Check other programs and how they are described
 - Know who is on your panel, but don't overdo it
 - Interact with colleagues/previous recipients

Title/ acronym

- Make it easy to remember and say
- Don't overdo the acronym puzzle
- Don't make it weird, stupid, or even offensive
- *Coulombus* is genius

The summary is important

- Should make it very clear to the reviewer what the question/idea is, why it should be investigated, and why you can do it
- A psychological trick – use the summary to make the reviewer want more
- This is not the place for heavy background and detailed description
- It will later serve as the reviewer's memo on the evaluation

Proposal

- Don't waste an ERC application on a proposal of "more of the same" - it will not convince the panel
- Don't make unjustified claims – it will be pointed out
- Provide a balanced, scholar background – the panel will find out if not
- Present in concise, scientific style with a logical flow – it should sink in on a first read
- Avoid too many abbreviations and jargon
- Avoid too many obvious and empty statements
- Avoid an overly interconnected logical structure where each section is only grasped with a deep knowledge of the others
- Let others read and comment on your proposal (and CV), use the research support unit

Part B1 – CV and short proposal

- CV is truly scrutinized
 - Credibility of the applicant?
 - Performed in different environments and on different subjects?
 - Good mentors and labs?
- Are the past contributions excellent and original?
- Can the applicant develop and conclude projects?
- Can the applicant inspire and facilitate younger people's career?
- Does the applicant "own" the field
- Highlight the good things
- Justify problematic or less impressive aspects
- Don't inflate your contributions and recognitions, don't try to cheat the panel
 - Eg. don't list travel bursaries as prestigious prizes, or change the order of authors on publications

Short project description

- Concentrate on flow and a clear overview of the grand ideas and questions being proposed
- Include all the qualities of the proposal
- Make it clear that subprojects are not overly interdependent (failed project 1 blocks the others?)
- If methods development – then know what it should solve and describe how it applies to a great question
- If applied research, then explain why it is well suited for ERC and not only you or a company

Long project description (B2)

- Follow the structure of the short description but avoid repetitive points/statements
- Include here the in-depth background for motivation and qualification of the question(s)
- Discuss obvious pitfalls and road blocks (which are briefly mentioned and excluded in the short description)

Interviews

- Present your strong drive and independent leadership to solve your great question(s)
- Include research updates, own and others
- Address criticism and new literature
- Never argue with the panel – address questions, doubts and criticism in a constructive, scholar way

Summary

- Respect and convince the panel
- Demonstrate that you can do the exciting , ground-breaking research proposed
- Use your peers as test-panel