

ERC Synergy Grant Call 2019: Notes and Tips for Applicants (Version Oct 18, 2018)

Quick overview: Synergy Grant Call 2019

Deadline: November 8, 2018 17:00 CET

- Minimum 2, maximum 4 Principal Investigators (PI) jointly submit a proposal as a **group**
- One PI is designated as administrative contact (Corresponding PI)
- For the first time, **one of the PIs (except the Corresponding PI) can be hosted by an institution outside of the EU/Associated Countries (AC)**
- At submission stage, only **one Host Commitment letter**, by the Corresponding Host Institution, is required
- **Waiting time** for **resubmission** of ERC proposals that failed **in in step 1 or step 2** of the evaluation (most likely 1 year or 2 years depending on evaluation category; depending on provisions in ERC Work Programme 2020) – see ERC Work Programme 2019, p 20
- Proposals that proceed to **step 3** but are not funded can be resubmitted “immediately” to the next call (most likely, depending on provisions of ERC Work Programme 2020)
- **Model CV-Template** provided by ERC
- **Track Record:** Presentation of up to five publications (Starter level) or up to ten publications (Consolidator or Advanced level) according to career stage of PI. **Preprints** may be included
- **Literature references** do **not count towards page limits** (B1+B2)
- **Avoid unnecessary repetition** of **part B1** in **part B2**
- **Mandatory Funding ID annex** to indicate ongoing and submitted grants
- Request for **exclusion of up to four reviewers** possible without justification
- **Open Access** is mandatory, related costs can be charged to the project
- ERC beneficiaries will automatically be covered by the H2020 provisions on **research data sharing** unless they opt out; related costs (e.g. for data management plan) can be charged to the project
- **Ethical issues table** needs to be completed online; **ethics self-assessment annex to be provided if any issue** in the ethical issues table applies (no template)
- **Minimum 30% of the PIs total working time** needs to be committed to the ERC project, and each PI needs to spend minimum 50% of his/her total working time in the EU or a Horizon 2020-Associated Country, even if the salary of the PI is not charged to the project (exception: if one PI is hosted by an institution outside of EU/AC)
- Link to recording of recent FFG Academy Webinar on the ERC Synergy Grant:
https://www.ffg.at/europa/veranstaltungen/ffg-akademie_2018-10-08_webinar

Important documents and useful links

Please read the following two documents:

- **ERC Work Programme 2019 (legally binding)**
http://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/wp/2018-2020/erc/h2020-wp19-erc_en.pdf
- **Information for Applicants to the Synergy Grant Call 2019**, including the detailed **panel expertise keywords**:
http://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/other/guides_for_applicants/h2020-guide19-erc-syg_en.pdf

- Participant Portal: Link to proposal submission for **SyG 2019**:
<http://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/portal/desktop/en/opportunities/h2020/topics/erc-2019-syg.html>
- **ERC Standard Proposal template** (pdf) for the Synergy Grant, including administrative forms and Letter of Commitment of the Host Institute:
http://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/call_ptef/pt/2018-2020/h2020-call-pt-erc-syg-2019_en.pdf → rtf.-versions available via the online-submission system (PPSS) after registration
- ERC Homepage: erc.europa.eu
- ERC Synergy Grant 2019 Applicant Mailbox for queries related to the call:
ERC-SYG-APPLICANTS@ec.europa.eu
- Link to previous **ERC panel members (frequently generalists)**:
 - <https://erc.europa.eu/document-category/evaluation-panels>

The names of the 5 Panel Chairs for the ERC Synergy Grant Call 2019 should be listed before the deadline of the Call at <https://erc.europa.eu/funding/synergy-grants> (Please **do not contact the Panel Chairs under any circumstances**, as this would likely give rise to a conflict of interest considering the SyG 2019 evaluation, possibly leading to the exclusion of the proposal)

- Link to previous **ERC external referees (specialists)**:
http://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/portal/desktop/en/funding/reference_docs.html#h2020-expertslists-excellent-erc

- Link to ERC **database of funded projects**:
<https://erc.europa.eu/projects-figures/erc-funded-projects>
In this database you can search for abstracts and principle investigators of ERC grants, including 24 funded Synergy projects from the pilot calls. Search results can be filtered to free keywords and according to ERC evaluation panel (the latter is not relevant for Synergy grants).
The CORDIS database also provides access to abstracts of funded ERC Synergy projects, and also displays the names of all PIs involved: http://cordis.europa.eu/projects/home_en.html
- ERC webpage on **open access**: <https://erc.europa.eu/funding-and-grants/managing-project/open-access>
- Guidelines on Implementation of Open Access to Scientific Publications and Research Data (ERC):
https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/other/hi/oa-pilot/h2020-hi-erc-oa-guide_en.pdf

Online submission of ERC proposals: Submit early, submit often

We strongly recommend to **submit a first version of the proposal around 1 week before the deadline**, in order to check for any browser problem or other technical issues that may block proposal submission, or lead to layout changes in the uploaded versions. Up to the call deadline, **you can continuously modify your proposal by submitting (not just uploading) a new version, which will overwrite the previous one.**

- In case of problems with the online submission system (PPSS), please **contact your host institution** (grant management/researchers' service), **FFG** (ylva.huber@ffg.at) or directly the **PPSS Service Desk: DIGIT-EFP7-SEP-SUPPORT@ec.europa.eu** or **+32 (2) 29 92222**.
- Information on how to use the online submission system is also available via the submission service user manual: http://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/support/sep_usermanual.pdf
- Please ensure that all the **required supporting documents are obtained and submitted** via PPSS in time (Commitment letter of the Host Institution, ethical issues annex [ethical self-assessment and any additional documents related to ethics], other supporting documents as applicable)

Ethical issues: Online table and ethical self-assessment annex

- The **ethical issues table** needs to be completed online in the Participant Portal (PPSS). The page numbers to be indicated in the ethics table refer to part B2. It is possible to list several page numbers divided by '/' (e.g. 12/14).
- For each ethical issue that applies to your proposal, please 1) tick the appropriate box in the list and 2) provide information on your approach to these issues in the **ethics self-assessment** document. As there is **no template** for the ethics self-assessment, we suggest to use a plain word-document indicating the relevant topic(s) from the online-ethics section and to describe your strategy to deal diligently with these issues (e.g. which ethic approvals you will obtain, compliance with relevant national and European law/directives, anonymization of data, insurance, etc). Convert the document into **pdf** format and upload it as **ethical self-assessment annex** in the PPSS. Furthermore, you can upload additional annexes with ethics-related documents (e.g. examples of informed consent forms)
- A **guideline** on how to complete the ethical self-assessment is available at <https://erc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document/file/EthicsSelfAssessmentStepByStep.pdf>
- **Please note:** The ethical self-assessment guide also refers to documents that may not be available at the stage of proposal submission but need to be provided at the stage of preparing the grant agreement, e.g. ethics approvals.
- The **ethical issues section will not be evaluated** during proposal evaluation, as communicated to FFG by the ERCEA: *“Any document related to ethics (including the ethics issues table) will not be made available to the ERC reviewers during the evaluation. Hence, they will not be instructed to look at them. The evaluators are not supposed to take ethic issues into account during evaluations. The ethics clearance is done by the ethics review after evaluation is final.”*
- For proposals with immediate ethics issues, it is nonetheless *“advisable to include a short paragraph summarising how they will be dealt with and refer to ethics self-assessment/annexes.”*

Evaluating scientific excellence: Questions that SyG reviewers need to answer

(ERC Work Programme 2019, p36)

1. Research Project **Ground-breaking nature, ambition and feasibility**

Starting, Consolidator, Advanced and Synergy **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 higher-than-normal 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 (based on the Extended Synopsis)?

To what extent are the proposed research methodology and working arrangements appropriate to achieve the goals of the project (based on the full Scientific Proposal)?

To what extent does the proposal involve the development of novel methodology (based on the full Scientific Proposal)?

To what extent are the proposed timescales, resources and PI commitment adequate and properly justified (based on the full Scientific Proposal)?

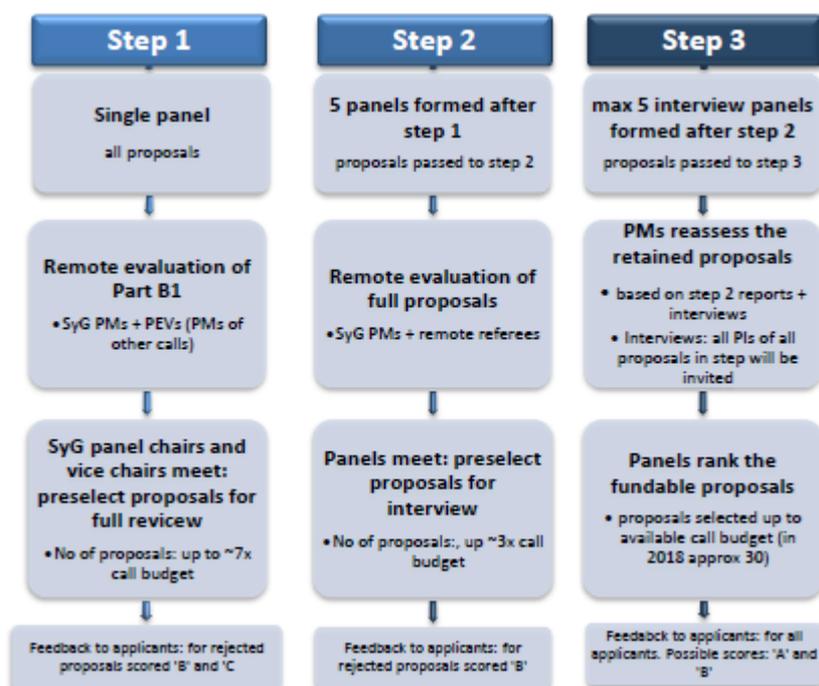
2. Principal Investigator (Advanced and Synergy) **Intellectual capacity and creativity**

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)**?

Evaluation process for the Synergy Grant



Step 1: The extended synopsis and the Principal Investigators' track records and CVs will be assessed (Part B1 only) by the whole pool of panel members in one panel from a generalist perspective. After a remote evaluation phase in which each proposal is reviewed by minimum three reviewers, the panel chairs and vice chairs meet in Brussels to discuss all proposals submitted to the Synergy Grant call and to select those passing to step 2.

Step 2: The complete version of the retained proposals will be assessed (Parts B1 and B2). Five panels will be formed right after the step 1 filtering to ensure the best expertise using the whole pool of the step 1 panel members. External specialized reviews will complement the generalist reviews of the panelists. The five panels will have around 15-18 experts in each panel (roughly 2 physical Sciences, 2 Life sciences, 1 Social sciences and humanities oriented panels). At the end of the remote individual assessment the five panels meet in Brussels.

Step 3: Following the step 2 evaluation the applicants will receive an invitation letter detailing the format and the length of the interview. All Principal Investigators of the proposals selected for interviews will be invited to present their proposal to the interview panel in Brussels. A minimum of three and a maximum of five panels would interview the applicants in parallel. These panels may not be the same panels as in step 2. The interview details will depend on the decision of the panels: interviews can last around 50 minutes in total. All Principal Investigators are required to be present at the interview. The presentation is an opportunity to elaborate on the synergies that the project aims to create.

PM: panel member; PEV: panel evaluator. PEV is an ERC term used for panel members of the other ERC frontier calls reviewing ERC SyG proposals.

Considerations and Tips for a competitive Synergy Grant proposal

Structure

- Think of a **narrative** and provide a **clear structure**, so that your proposal reads as a compelling, authentic story.
- To demonstrate the synergetic nature of your project, the proposal should be well integrated, **one of piece**, and not come across as separate projects by two to four PIs
- Provide the big picture: Introduction/state of the art are important sections to put your research into a **broader context** (appealing also to panel members who are not specialists in your field) and to motivate your research goals.
- The introduction/motivation should, however, not dominate the proposal: The **major part** of the proposal (also in B1) should explain your **novel approach**.
- Present the concrete **aims/objectives** of your project rather early and in a highly visible manner (e.g. bullet points, bold fonts, text box). Panel Members like to see them at the first glance.
- The **perfect match between aims/objectives**, the **methodology** and the **workplan** of the project should be easy to grasp. For instance, you can refer to aim(s) 1,2 when describing method x or research line/workpackage y). This will support the impression of a well integrated, coherent proposal.
- Describe the **significant synergies, complementarity and added value of the group beyond the current work of the PIs** to enable it to jointly achieve the project's scientific objectives.

Part B1 is a crucial element of the proposal, as only this part is read at step 1 of the evaluation. The extended synopsis in B1 should therefore contain **all important information** to evaluate the breakthrough character, feasibility and the synergetic effect of the project. This includes:

- key information on the **research gap, core novelty, vision, aims, methodology**
- significant **risks/challenges** of the project and your **contingency plans/alternative strategies**
- key **preliminary data/results/proof of principle** already obtained
- information on how you will **validate** the results of the project
- any aspects that may be important to show the **explanatory power** of your approach, e.g. whether the results you obtain will likely be generalizable; demonstrating causality rather than “only” correlation; statistical powering etc – as applicable in the respective research field(s)
- showing that the project objectives can **only be achieved through the specific combination of knowledge and skills** brought together by the PIs

Based on ERC evaluation comments, we strongly recommend to also include in B1:

- **a sentence/paragraph** on the **team member composition** in B1: number of postdocs, PhD students to be hired; their expected expertise
- **rough timing information**, e.g. a brief time plan in 1-2 sentences, or timing information in brackets, for instance “aim 1... /phase 1[Year 1-3]“ / “key intermediate goal x [Year 3]“). The idea is to provide an overview on main phases or **important intermediate goals** of your project, if applicable, and as appropriate and credible in your field. The timing information should thus fit with an ambitious project and not give an incremental impression

→More details on team and time plan should be provided in B2 (please see below)
- One or a few high quality **figure(s)** can also be very helpful for B1
- **References** to literature should be included. They do not count towards the five pages limit. The references in B1 may also support Panel Members in selecting the external referees to evaluate the proposal in step 2 of the evaluation.

Part B2 should present the **required details for the evaluation by specialist reviewers** in step 2. This concerns in particular the **methodology, preliminary work/data, risks and contingency plans, interpretation methods** and how you aim to **validate results**, but also details on resources, including the **team composition, working arrangements within the group**, and the **infrastructure/scientific environment at the host institution(s)**.

Part B2 also contains the joint budget table for all PIs (see template).

- Highlight any **novel/unconventional methodology**
- Consider which aspects should be addressed to **demonstrate feasibility** and **explanatory power**, e.g. statistical powering; theoretical framework,...
- Deal **appropriately with significant risks** (contingency plans, alternative strategies; promising preliminary data)
- At least in most cases, reviewers will likely expect a reasonable **time plan** for an ERC project. It has meanwhile become standard in part B2 of ERC proposals to present e.g. a Gantt chart or overview table on key intermediate goals/milestones. The time plan should however not be too detailed to be credible for a groundbreaking research agenda.
- Present the **composition and expertise requirements** for your team (PhDs, Post Docs), as well as **working arrangements**, e.g. joint supervision of PhDs/PostDocs by different PIs; supervision of PhD students supported by Post-Docs; overall supervision and guidance by the group of PIs; meetings, etc. → tailor-made for the needs of the project.

- Emphasize your **commitment** to the project as group of PIs, including the percentage of total working time devoted to the project for each PI, in the running text (in addition to the “time commitment” table next to the budget table)

If you think there could be reasonable doubts by reviewers on whether you will be able to fulfil the time commitment due to other duties, describe your strategy up front (e.g. agreement on reduced teaching duties with host institution for the duration of the project,...)

- **References** to literature should be included (they do not count towards the 15 page-limit)

Avoid unnecessary repetition between B1 and B2

As part B1 should capture the essence of the entire proposal, B1 and B2 need to be mutually consistent. **However, panel members seem to increasingly disapprove of longer sections with identical wording in B1 and B2.** As both B1 and B2 are evaluated at step 2, you can also **save space in B2** by e.g. referring to a figure or section in B1, instead of repeating it in B2.

Proposal Abstract

The abstract is an important part of the proposal, also during panel discussions. The majority of panel members may only read the abstract and possibly leaf through the proposals. The abstract should therefore present the essence of your project, capturing the scientific challenge, novel approach, objectives, potential impact and unique features of the project.

Further considerations for B1 and B2:

Novelty and Vision

- Address explicitly the **groundbreaking nature** of the project: What is the important **research gap** you aim to address? What is the core novelty of your approach?
- Besides the short-term anticipated **impact** of the project on your field/other fields, it may also be useful to sketch your more **long-term vision** (6-10 years or beyond), to further underline the transformative nature of the project.
- It should be evident for reviewers that your approach is really **novel, original, and timely**. Thus it should not come across as an incremental “extension” of previous research by the PIs. Explain the **unique features** and the advantages of your approach compared to **competing approaches**.

Hypothesis-driven project/clearly defined research questions

- While there can be differences between research fields/disciplines, ERC reviewers frequently comment positively on the fact that a project is hypothesis-driven. In any case, however,

the overarching research questions should be clearly presented. Proposals that apparently lack such question(s) and are perceived as largely technology- or methodology-driven will likely be at a disadvantage.

Scope of the project well justified

- As for any research proposal, also the scope of an ambitious ERC Synergy Grant project can be questioned by reviewers – either as being too broad/unfocused or too narrowly designed. It is therefore advisable to clearly explain the approach you have chosen together - why are you convinced that this is the best approach, and that it is feasible within 6 years?

Clarity

- Your proposal needs to be **well understandable** also for **reviewers that are not specialists** in your own research field/topic.
- This will be supported by **precise wording**/descriptions, **clear** (working) **definitions** where possible, concrete **examples**, high quality **figures**
- Ensure a reader-friendly layout, with sufficient spaces, highlighting key messages, e.g. by short summary of a section in a text box, bullet points; selective use of bold fonts

A group of PIs, not a consortium

- As the ERC explicitly does not fund consortia (see ERC Work Programme, p9), please always refer to the “group” of PIs (even if the online forms in the submission tool may refer to a “consortium”, because the submission is used for all types of Horizon 2020 projects)

Demonstrating a competitive Advanced, Consolidator or Starter profile (see also below)

- **CV, Track Record, State of the art:**
Important contributions by the PIs should not only be presented in the CV and Track Record, but also in the running text of the extended synopsis or B2, e.g. when presenting preliminary work (“As we could show in [ref.x]...“)
- **Depending on the career stage, up to 5 (Starter) or 10 (Consolidator, Advanced) representative publications** should be listed in the track record for each PI (early achievement track record or 10-year track record; see Work Programme 2019).
- The PIs’ **experience in team leadership** should be reflected in the CV/Track record (e.g. [co]supervision of PhD students; major contributions to launching the careers of outstanding researchers)

- Based on the experience from previous Synergy Calls, it seems advisable that the Corresponding PI is at “Advanced” career level (10 year track record)
- For Synergy Grant applications, **no formal check** regarding the applicability of a Starter or Consolidator Track Record will be carried out by the ERCEA: *“We are not requiring proof of any PhD documents, neither proof of career break at submission stage. It is a trust based approach, in which an applicant has to position himself/herself according to where they believe being in their career (See please the StG, CoG and AdG profiles in the [ERC Work Programme 2019](#)). We hope that the applicants will provide the exact date in their CVs and they will clearly explain any career break in part B1. This is done to help the evaluators to better judge an applicant, to ensure that a very young applicant will not be evaluated according to the same criteria and a very senior one”.*

Feedback by colleagues

- Questions and critical comments of colleagues (both within and beyond your research field(s), ideally with a background similar to that of potential panel members) on the proposal will be highly valuable
- We suggest to picture and prepare for the situation of the interview in step three already when drafting the proposal, e.g. by **collecting critical questions from specialists and non-specialists**. (At the interview, the group will likely have around 20 minutes to “pitch” the project and around 30 minutes to answer questions by panel members, which will typically include questions that were submitted by specialist reviewers in writing).
- Where applicable, also a final polishing of the proposal by an English native speaker is highly recommended.

Specific remarks on B1-CV, Track Record and B2-resources

B1, Section b: Curriculum vitae (max. 2 pages per PI)

- The structure of the model **CV template** may be modified, but the ERC recommends the use of the provided template (panel members seem to appreciate it)
- In addition to the suggestions provided by the CV template, please present also key activities as reviewer for **journals**
- Provide the **name of your PhD supervisor and the title of your thesis**
- Ensure an impeccable and reader-friendly **layout** also of the CV and Track Record section
- **Appendix to CV: All ongoing and submitted grants and funding of the PI (Funding ID)** Mandatory information not counting towards page limits

- According to information by the ERCEA, the information in this table is also used to support the selection of reviewers for the proposal (avoiding potential conflicts of interest with reviewers that might be involved in running/submitted projects with the applicant).

However, if several ongoing grants are listed which will temporally overlap with the ERC project, it is advisable to also demonstrate that **the PI(s) will be able to fulfil his/her/their time commitment to the ERC project**, e.g. by indicating the percentage of time commitment of the PI(s) for the other grants in the table.

- Either in the CV or the Track Record , we recommend that PIs also present **concluded grants** (full list, or selection), and possibly also the amount of funding they raised so far

B1, Section c: Early achievements track-record or 10 years track record (max. 2 pages per PI)

- We recommend to provide **summary/overview information** for the reviewers (e.g. total number of publications, conference talks; weblink to full list of publications), as well as specific **highlights**. You can also add field relevant bibliometric indicators .
- For the list of five/ten top publications in the track record, it is very advisable to **describe their significance and your contribution in 1-2 sentences**, e.g. in a textbox (“Here, we could show for the first time...”)
- **Preprints** may be included, if freely available from a preprint server (preprints should be properly referenced and either a link to the preprint or a DOI should be provided
- There is hardly any information available to date on how much attention ERC reviewers pay to the provision of listing only **"up to" five/ten publications** in the Track Record. According to the ERC Executive Agency, this is *“not an eligibility issue but how strictly each panel will look at this in the evaluation is their own decision and cannot be predicted.”*
- In any case, we recommend to mention any **further important papers of particular relevance for your ERC project** (i.e. in addition to the top 5/10) in the proposal as well, e.g. by integrating this information in a brief additional running text section in the Track record ("research profile", "research interests" or similar), and/or in the extended synopsis and B2.

B2, Section c : Resources – not counting towards 15 pages limit in B2

- Apart from explaining the project costs in the adequate detail, this section is also suitable to present **detailed information on the team composition and expertise**, including the expertise requirements for Post Docs and PhD students that will be hired for the project.
- We also recommend to present relevant information on the **host institution/research environment** here, to support the message of "the right project and team in the right place"

Budget table:

→ Please contact the grant management office at your ERC host institution for support with the budget calculation

- **Other direct costs** (with overhead flat rate): This category includes contracts to purchase goods, works or services, e.g. contract for a computer; contract for an audit certificate on the financial statements; contract for the publication of brochures; contract for the creation of a project website, contract for organization of the rooms and catering for a meeting, contract for hiring IPR consultants/agents. These costs do not arise from directly implementing the action tasks of the ERC project, but they are necessary to implement these tasks. In Horizon 2020, overheads apply to these costs, as opposed to the case for subcontracts (http://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/grants_manual/amga/h2020-amga_en.pdf, 122)
- **Audit costs** should be included in the **other direct costs** category. In Horizon 2020, only one audit (certificate of the financial statement) is required at the end of the project, if the funding (direct costs) amounts to more than 325.000 EUR
- **Subcontracting costs** (without overheads): Costs for subcontracts arise from the implementation of specific tasks which are part of the action (ERC project) by a third party. No overheads can be charged for these costs.
- **Equipment:** Please note that only **depreciation rates** (according to national rules) can be charged to the ERC for equipment. If the depreciation period of the equipment in question exceeds the duration of the ERC project, the remaining costs have to be carried by other means. Please contact your host institution in case of questions in this context.
- Do not forget the possibility to include costs for publications, including **open access fees** (Article 29.2 of the ERC Model Grant Agreement). In Horizon 2020, each beneficiary must ensure open access to all peer-reviewed scientific publications relating to its results. Also costs related to **open access to research data** (Article 29.3. of the ERC Model Grant Agreement) can be charged.
- **Other direct costs with no overheads** : This category includes costs of resources made available by third parties which are not used on the premises of the beneficiary (= host institution), e.g. access to large research facilities owned by a third party and not used on the premises of the beneficiaries.
- **PI salary:** PIs may request funding for their salary corresponding to the percentage of total working time dedicated to the ERC project (or a smaller fraction of that amount), even if they already receive a salary by their host institution. Funding of (part of) a PI's salary can also support the host institution in hiring a teaching replacement in case there is an agreement to reduce teaching obligations of a PI during the ERC project. Please consider, however, whether funding of the PI salary could result in a less-than-optimal number/experience level of team members due to budget constraints.

- There is an additional short budget table in the template only to be used for requesting additional funding above EUR 10,000.000 EUR. If the table is not applicable, it should be deleted.
- For each PI, the time commitment to the project has to be indicated (table in B2 template). Based on experiences from previous calls, it may be advantageous to foresee a time commitment above the minimum 30% at least for some/one of the PIs, if possible.
- For Synergy Grant proposals, **the resources section (c) does not count towards the page limit** in B2 (see template B2 and Information for Applicants to the Synergy Grant 2018 call, p20)

Indicative evaluation schedule for the Synergy Grant Call 2019 (may be changed)

Updates at: <https://erc.europa.eu/node/2289>

