

The European Research Council

Towards a PI centric view in the management of ERC grants

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ERCEA – PI Centric View

Background

- ERCEA's overall aim is to promote excellent research, which will significantly advance the frontiers of knowledge and will feed into the innovation chain leading to economic growth. By design the ERC funding schemes shall offer **attractive funding conditions and highest quality support** (speed, simplicity, flexibility).
- The ERCEA is presently in its **3rd year of autonomous operations**, managing over 1.500 Grant Agreements.
- Although the mid-term for the majority of projects has not yet been reached, there are **early signs of positive impact**, e.g. publicly acclaimed rewards, groundbreaking scientific advancements, a development of interdependencies in between theory and pragmatic application, emergent synergies in interdisciplinary research, etc.



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ERC Grant Specificities

Main specificities of ERC GRANTS:

- Separation of scientific and financial/managerial strands
- Grant selection is made on basis of the scientific excellence of the project only, whilst
- Daily management and financial follow-up of grants is a matter of cooperation between the ERCEA and the Host Institutions



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Separated strands: Advantages / Risks

This separation represents for the PI:



an advantage

- Focus on scientific aspects of the research
- Reduction of administrative burden
- More scientific freedom (excellence)



a risk

- Gaps in communication with HIs and ERCEA
- Lack of information on rights and obligations

→ This separation was confirmed as being beneficial for researchers in the latest satisfaction survey run by ERCEA in which showed that 54,1% of PIs and 56,3% HI are satisfied with the separation of reporting



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Lessons learnt so far

1. Change of Host Institutions without following the formal steps
2. Obligation to carry out a part of the project in Europe seems insufficiently known, as some PIs take up positions in third countries, without informing ERCEA
3. Working time requirements remain uncertain.
4. Management of the budget of the ERC grant is sometimes constrained by HIs
5. Disregard of PI's scientific autonomy in the choice of the team's structure
6. Limited information provided by HIs to PIs regarding social provisions

Until now ad-hoc/reparatory solutions have been found by ERCEA.



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History of the PI Centric Action Plan

ERC Scientific Council acknowledged the positive aspects of the two management strands, but requested the development of a service based action plan that would help diminish the counter effects.

December 2010 – Scientific Council agreed with the launch of a PI centric action plan to re-centre the PIs into the leading role throughout the full grant process and empower them further in the scientific management of their projects, while ensuring that full compliance and transparency in the application of FP7 legal, financial and contractual rules.

PI centric strategy note lists several **actions to develop permanent and effective mechanisms of dialogue**, feedback and consultation **between ERCEA and the scientific community**.

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Action Plan

Actions forecasted in the PI centric note could be structured in three main categories :

1. **Actions to enhance and diversify the support provided by ERCEA to the PIs** (e.g. creation of a PIs' Helpdesk, development of simplified rules and procedures, outreach events, an interactive and relevant new webpage,)
2. **Support to Host Institutions in order for these ones to help further the PIs** (new sets of FAQ, new and simplified procedures and templates,)
3. **Development of a means for researchers enhanced cooperation's new ERC website** (e.g. developing webpage application for discussion forums)

In order to verify that these actions do respond to the real needs of the researchers community a **satisfaction survey on the ERCEA Grant Management Department performance was carried out** in March 2011.

The results confirmed the actions suggested.



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Action Plan – Pls' Helpdesk

Creation of a specific help desk dedicated to Pls

- To address all kind of questions about financial, contractual and managerial issues rose during the implementation of ERC GA.
- To assume an intermediary role on issues with the Host Institutions ensuring full confidentiality
- Not to replace but to complement the usual contact with project officers in charge of different aspects of each grant.
- To increase efficient channels of support for Pls (response time:1 - 7 days).

→ **Date of release: March 2011**



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Action Plan – 1. PIs' Helpdesk (2)

Main issues identified on the basis of number of questions submitted

- Staff matters (flexibility in team composition, bonuses, etc)
- Eligibility of costs
- IT/technical/general/administrative info
- Legal issues (IPR, extension of grants, UTRO, etc.)
- Change of HI, portability
- Relations PIs & HIs



PI Helpesk phone:

+ 32 2 2992465

Email: erc-c2-pi-helpdesk@ec.europa.eu



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Action Plan – 2. Development of a new ERC Website

Development of a new ERCEA website

- New structure with specific pages targeting different specific groups (HI, PI, general public, etc) and including documents that are directly related to their respective interest.
- Main innovation **Restricted area dedicated to Principal Investigators.**
- Providing a series of frequently asked questions addressed to Principal Investigators, a set of practical technical fiches on how to run an ERC grant, and a forum for debate and idea shaping for the ERC Researchers.



Date of release: Autumn 2011



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Action Plan – 2. Development of a new set of rules and procedures targeted on specific needs of PIs

In order to promote highest quality research and make European funding schemes most attractive and accessible ERCEA is in a permanent quest to review rules and procedures:

- (i) The main sets of financial and legal guidelines have been reviewed and simplified:
 - Amendment Guidelines
 - An Addendum to the Guide for Financial Rules (reflecting only the major deviations from the FP7 guide specific to the mono-beneficiary ERC grants)
- (ii) An ERC corpus of soft law has also been developed, interpreting the rules in the light of the specific ERC grants, such as : rules for change of Host institution, simpler rules for subcontracting, budget shifts, etc.
- (iii) Finally in order to speed up the procedures, ERCEA made available a set of templates that the PIs and their hosts could use rapidly in the daily business with the Agency (e.g. PFMR, budget tracking form, templates for amendments, etc)



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Action Plan – 4. Outreach events

Outreach events

In addition to the events organised for NCPs and HIs, ERCEA launched starting with the Oslo conference a series of events focused on PIs requirements.

The **aim** of these events is two folded:

- (i) to transfer knowledge on the management of ERC grants to the PIs,
- (ii) to receive first hand feedback from the actors on the scientific scene on how modern and efficient research should be funded and managed.

Specificities of these events:

- Evaluative agenda, including also topics on demand from specific needs of PIs, e.g., scientific autonomy, portability, etc.
- Sessions for PIs to share best practices and common issues faced in the management of their ERC grants.

Agenda for 2011: Oslo (May) ; Rome (June), Warsaw, Germany; United Kingdom (Northern Ireland)



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Action Plan – 5. Documentation and information packages

Support materials are under preparation in both the classical paper version and in interactive on line applications for both the:

1. Principal Investigators :

- ❖ **FAQs** for PIs needs (such as how do I build a team, how can I transfer my grants, what are my rights and obligations, how do I feel in a scientific report, what is my role in the financial reporting, etc)

2. Host Institutions :

- ❖ A **Compendium on reporting**,
- ❖ **FAQs** on grant management issues,
- ❖ Eventually a **training kit** for HI to inform the PIs on their rights, obligation and methodology of work throughout the grant life.



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Action Plan – 6. ERCEA Grant Management Department Satisfaction Survey

The satisfaction Survey run in March 2011 had as identified objectives to:

- Take stock of the level of satisfaction and of the quality of services and interactions between the third parties to the ERC grants (Principal Investigators, Host Institutions ERC Executive Agency (ERCEA))
- Better understand the evolving needs of ERC GA stakeholders.
- Streamline and simplify procedures to further ease the implementation of the IDEAS Programme.



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Conclusions

- ❑ PI centric action plan should be seen as an evolving instrument to constantly improve and diversify the services provided by ERCEA under the IDEAS programme.
- ❑ PIs Feedback and fresh ideas both in science and in management of grants are needed to keep up with the reality of the world of innovation and scientific research.

