

Research RTD, 7th EC Framework Programme 2007-2013: specific programme "Ideas", frontier research

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The Commission presents its annual report on the European Research Council's (ERC) operations and realisation of the objectives set out in the Specific Programme "Ideas" in 2011.

Work Programme: the 2011 Work Programme for the Specific Programme "Ideas" was adopted by the Commission on 19 July 2010, and subsequently revised to include the new granting opportunity, the Proof of Concept. Apart from the introduction of the Proof of Concept Grants, few adjustments were made in the scientific strategy: the eligibility window for the Starting Grant was further expanded; it now stands from 2 - 12 years from PhD award (2 - 7 for "starters" and 7-12 for "consolidators"). The restriction on reapplication was also relaxed: applicants can now reapply to the following call if their proposal was evaluated as above the quality threshold. The interdisciplinary domain has been renamed as the "fourth domain" with a 10% indicative budget.

Programme Implementation: in the implementation of the Programme in 2011, commitment credits of EUR 1.3 billion (global commitment) and payments of EUR 725 million were fully executed, representing 100% of the operational credits of the Ideas Specific Programme for 2011. Around 2.2% of the operational budget was spent on administration.

- **ERC Starting Grants:** the 2011 ERC Starting Grant call had an indicative budget of EUR 661 million. In total 4080 proposals were received distributed by domain as follows: 1690 proposals in Physical Sciences and Engineering, 1440 in Life Sciences and 950 in Social Sciences and Humanities. A total of 485 proposals were selected for funding with a total of more than EUR 670 million awarded and an overall average awarded grant of around EUR 1.4 million.

The 2012 Starting Grant call has an indicative budget of EUR 730 million. A total of 4741 proposals were submitted in response: 2058 for Physical Sciences and Engineering, 1653 for Life Sciences and 1030 for Social Sciences and Humanities, representing respectively 43%, 35% and 22%, a split similar to the 2011 Starting Grant call, and the 2010 Starting Grant call.

- **ERC Advanced Grants:** the 2011 ERC Advanced Grant call had an indicative budget of EUR 661 million. A total of 2284 proposals were received distributed by domain as follows: 917 proposals in Physical Sciences and Engineering (40%), 789 (35%) in Life Sciences and 578 in Social Sciences and Humanities (25%). The evaluation process resulted in a total of 294 proposals retained for funding with a total of about EUR 700 million awarded and an overall average awarded grant of around EUR 2.4 million.

The 2012 ERC Advanced Grant call has an indicative budget of EUR 680 million.

ERC Proof of Concept: in order to strengthen the ERC's role in the innovation chain from frontier research to socio-economic benefits, the Scientific Council developed and launched in 2011 a new granting opportunity – the Proof of Concept – which is offered to ERC grant holders to establish the innovation potential of ideas arising from their ERC-funded projects. The scheme aims to cover a funding gap in the earliest stage of an innovation.

The first Proof of Concept call was published in March 2011 with an indicative budget of EUR 10 million, approximately half of which for each of the two evaluation rounds following the two deadlines for submission set in June and in November 2011 respectively. Only researchers already holding an ERC Starting or Advanced Grant were eligible to apply for Proof of Concept funding. A total of 78 proposals were received at the first deadline and 73 of them were considered eligible for evaluation, with the following distribution per domain of the original ERC grant held by the applicant: 58% in Physical Sciences and Engineering, 34% in Life Sciences and 8% in Social Sciences and Humanities. The evaluation resulted in 30 proposals retained for funding.

At the second deadline, a total of 73 proposals were received and 67 of them were considered eligible for evaluation, with the following distribution per domain of the original ERC grant held by the applicant: 61% in Physical Sciences and Engineering, 34% in Life Sciences and 5% in Social Sciences and Humanities.

Monitoring, Assessment and Evaluation of the Specific Programme "Ideas": an evaluation of the ERC main results was prepared in conjunction with the ex-ante impact assessment of the [Commission's proposal on Horizon 2020](#), the next Framework Programme for Research and Innovation.

Findings from this evaluation include the following:

- by the end of 2011 more than 2000 frontier-research projects were up and running in around 470 prestigious research institutions in Europe;
- as of 2011, thirty-six ERC grantees have received prestigious international scientific prizes and awards, among which 4 Nobel Prizes and 3 Fields Medals;
- the number of articles acknowledging ERC funding published in peer-reviewed journals increased from over 1200 in 2010 to above 1750 in 2011, totalling more than 3400 since 2008. This is a combination of rising number of projects and maturing projects producing more results;
- focusing on articles in the two of the most-cited scientific journals (Nature and Science) it can be seen that the ERC footprint is rapidly increasing. In 2011, every week at least one ERC-funded project published its findings in either Nature or Science. This corresponded to every two weeks and every seven weeks in 2010 and 2009 respectively.

Outlook: the ERC grants have been well received by the research community. Since its start in 2007 the ERC has completed eight calls for proposals for the Starting and Advanced Grant schemes. The competitions yielded a total of over 26000 proposals out of which more than 2500 have been selected for funding through a rigorous peer review.

In 2012, the Scientific Council will introduce the Synergy Grants to enable small groups of researchers to bring together complementary skills, knowledge and resources, in order to jointly address research problems at the frontier of knowledge, going beyond what the individual researchers could achieve alone. The Synergy grants are introduced on a pilot basis and with a budget of EUR150 million.

2012 will also see the discussions at the European Parliament and the Council on the Commission's proposals for Horizon 2020. One major ambition of Horizon 2020 is to support the EU's position as a world leader in science with a dedicated budget of EUR 24.6 billion, including an increase in funding of 77% for ERC. Boosting the ERC budget will allow more top rate researchers and their pioneering ideas to be supported, and especially younger researchers to be provided with a long-term perspective.

Lastly, in 2012, the ERC Executive Agency will have completed 3 years of autonomous existence and will undergo an external evaluation, which will include a cost-benefit analysis.