ERC Stg 2019
PE9 (Universe science)
CMBForward
A programme for cosmology from current and next-generation Cosmic Microwave Background experiments

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Before starting the application

• Become familiar with the ERC and what it means to apply and to run a grant
  • Understand the scheme, read the guidelines for applicants
  • I was previously an ERC postdoc, have been part of an ERC team/project
  • I had multiple conversations with a previous colleague now working at the ERC about the process (go to workshops and grab as many information as possible from people running the ERC)

• Ask successful applicants to share their application with you
  • Read other cases, it helps understand how to address the panel
  • Read applications in your research area
    • Focus on how people made it accessible to others – you are used to your research field jargon

• Shape your research programme
  • This is not (always) a single-focus project, broad scientific vision is important
  • Your programme has to fit within the ERC vision
  • My first application ended at Step1 mostly because my proposal was too forward looking and the panel wanted results within the grant period. The second time I expanded the proposal to give a more continuous timeline of outputs.

• Check the panel composition
Preparing the application

• Look at your schedule and allocate time
  • My deadline was mid October but I took advantage of academic holidays in August to work full time on the application (I took me almost a month to get a complete draft of B1 and B2)
  • Leave plenty of time for comments and ask both experts and non-experts in your field to comment on your draft – this was a huge help for me
  • Set a deadline so that you don’t continue editing forever

• Help the panel judge your proposal. Be aware of your competitors and of the risks of your programme and don’t hide them.
  • Providing a risk/gain register you show research maturity and make it difficult for the panel and the reviewers to come up with weaknesses
  • Think about your broader research landscape and why it’s you that ERC should fund. For me it was crucial to emerge in large international collaborations with many competitors – this was a key aspect that I stressed throughout the full application

• Ask what you need to deliver your programme but explain it in detail
  • It should be the programme driving the budget and not viceversa
  • Look at the number of postdoc years, travel etc. only after drafting the proposal plan and schedule
  • I asked and justified need for the extra 0.5M and was successful
  • Check with your EU office if you are unsure on what and how to ask
Preparing for the interview

• Prepare your talk in advance and have (multiple) mock interviews
  • Ask a broad audience representative of your panel and some experts in your research field to listen to your presentation and ask questions
  • Be prepared to change your slides based on feedback
  • Collect questions from previous applicants – both successful and unsuccessful and especially in your research field

• Prepare a set of answers to questions
  • You can guess some of the questions that the panel will ask you, prepare a short but punchy answer for those. Knowing that I had some ready-to-go answers gave me confidence in a scary part of the process

• Be aware of competitors
  • Think about how to stand out, it will have to be a combo of you and your research programme
  • I had close collaborators (and friends) being interviewed in the same call
    • Don’t be discouraged, multiple grants in similar topics can happen

• Be ready to make last-minute fixes
  • The colors of my slides were different on the Windows machine used by the ERC
Lessons learned from a year of project running

• Your project timeline and personnel plan is only indicative
  • Be ready to take opportunities (i.e., hire two postdocs in Y1 rather than Y2 if some brilliant candidates who can advance the project are interested/available)
  • Your project might depend on other people/groups, make sure there are some lines of work that you can pursue independently or how to shift the schedule to advance other aspects of the programme while waiting

• Need to be flexible to adapt plan based on new research avenues
  • Let the programme expand/move/deviate from the initial plan if needed or if something new in your field has come up
Good luck!