

Useful info for PI going for ERC personal interview

Background

It is known that the ERC interview might be experienced as challenging and stressful. The ERC personal interview is available only for StG- and CoG-applicants and give an unique occasion to defend your project proposal. There are two main requested factors within ERC - the best PIs and the best research projects. Please note that there are different specific instructions regarding the interview within various review panels and the details will be given in the invitation letter sent to you by the ERC. In common/typically, the time allocated to presentation takes 5 to 12 minutes. Afterwards, approx 15-20 minutes for the questions and answers are run as a scientific debate which might be either encouraging or confrontational, or both. The time given for your presentation (and the number of slides allowed which might be as many as just one slide) varies from panel to panel and from year to year. The interviews are scheduled one after the other so you compete with other PIs on the same spot. The usual number of panel members is 15-20 people with a broad expertise. At least three "lead members" have read your proposal in full and will probably state most of the questions; some questions may come from external referees. Your application will have a rank based on review scores and the panel would like to confirm that the rank position is correct.

Some advises for a successful presentation

- The presentation time is allocated to present the proposed research project and any critical information not included in the written proposal.
- The first slide is important to win the panel members' attention from the very beginning.
- Make a basic presentation of your project: What is your scientific question(s)? Why is it important? How will you address it?
- Don't overwhelm the panel with too much info and slides – it should be comfortable and easy to listen to you and follow your presentation to the very end.
- Keep it simple, but not too simple (you are talking to world-leading experts).
- Put a slide about you as PI and your team members. Convince that you are a good project/team leader (this is one of the reasons to why they invited you to this interview).
- Keep in mind that the panel have seen your CV, so don't go into deep about this in your presentation, but inform of any new relevant information about you as PI that was not there at the time of proposal writing and is of importance for this project.
- Prepare some extra slides containing relevant information for the interview (you might be allowed to use them).

Some tips and hints for a successful interview

- The discussion is devoted to questions and answers on the scientific content and implementation of the project, and the project's budget and resources.
- Be well prepared to defend your project and make a memorable presentation. Be yourself and be confident.
- Show that you know your project and you are excited about it!
- The main questions are: What is unique about this project? Why you? Why now?
- Do not try to summarize the full proposal. We urge you to highlight the relevant for panel aspects.
- Bearing timeline in mind, convince the panel in uniqueness and capability of your proposal combined with high risk and high gain project conducted by an excellent researcher.
- High presentation skills and preparation are required, both technically and mentally. Be well prepared to overcome any unexpected distractions. Training and simulations, particularly for unpleasant, provoking and confrontational situations, are the must.

Some examples of questions from the panel

- *Will it be competitive in an international perspective?*
- *Who are your major competitors?*
- *Are there major international initiatives that will make your project of less interest?*
- *So, why will your approach work while others have failed?*
- *Are there any weak points in the research proposal that you need to clarify?*
- *If the approach fails what will be the alternative way forward? The panel does not want to fund a five-year project if the success is entirely dependent on one method/approach that may fail.*
- *This project is slightly outside your 'comfort zone', how are you going to cope with this?*
- *Independence – (from e.g. platforms, collaborators, former supervisor etc)*
- *Budget – extra equipment? Feasibility – is the work promised in line with the funding requested/available?*

Practicalities

- Practice your talk in front of live audience (*VR training meeting, RO individual coaching, the colleagues at your lab/school etc*).
- Stick to the allocated time – they will interrupt you when the time is over.
- Check previous panel members on ERC website.
- Talk to prior ERC reviewers and ERC committee members (if you know any).
- Talk to PIs at your university that already have an ERC grant.
- Book a hotel close to the ERC building; travel to Brussels one day in advance (especially if the interview is in the morning). ERCEA may reimburse your travel costs.
- Don't hang around in the waiting room longer than necessary.