

## **The Guide to Collaborations in ERC**

Excluding the ERC Synergy grant, ERC grants are personal. This means that the ERC AdG, CoG and StG projects cannot be collaborative efforts. Since many applicants are used to working in collaboration with their peers and colleagues – this comes as a contrast and strikes as counter-intuitive. In many other grants, collaborations are common and even encouraged. In ERC, excluding the PI's direct team members, collaborators are normally not welcome to the research effort. The previous sentence is not unequivocal. Working with many ERC applicants enables us to track specific instances for which collaborations in ERC were in fact acceptable and even needed. In light of this apparent controversy, many applicants are unsure if their collaborative inclusion would help or hurt their application. Both a conceptual understanding of when collaborations are perceived positively, and a practical understanding of how this should be presented in the application, is needed to get it right. For this reason, we'll address below exactly when collaborations in ERC are acceptable and how best to manage them.

### **Why collaborations in ERC are not a default**

The motivation behind the ERC's attitude towards collaborations stems from the fact that the ERC seeks to fund highly independent, notably creative and exceptionally capable PIs performing research that is unique to them. In other words – no one should be able to carry out the research project suggested better than the applicant. Working with collaborators might imply, or even worse – clearly indicate, that the PI is not in the right level of expertise expected in ERC. Furthermore, it could suggest that the core of the research project is not tailored to his/her expertise and capacity. ERC applicants should be independent and creative thinkers that have the right experience, expertise, capacity and capability to carry out the project. Having collaborators that work with the PIs on the ERC research project may in fact cast a shadow on the PI in any or all above-mentioned desired attributes.

Therefore, our clear recommendation, based on years of experience working with ERC applicants, is to avoid collaborative work on tasks which constitute the core of the research in ERC applications. If, despite the above approach, a PI identifies a task for which a collaboration is absolutely fundamental, the following must take place.

### **When *can* collaborations in ERC be relevant**

Having stated the above recommendation, there are nevertheless a few cases which allow for exceptions. In all the cases listed below, the key guideline is the same – collaborations are allowed, as long as they:

- bring specific and unique expertise or capability, which is different and indeed compliments that of the PI;
- are needed for a particular, specific complementary task (to the core research);
- do not impede the scientific leadership of the PI in the project in general, and on the core research in particular.

It should be noted that the ERC does not apply any restrictions on joint publications stemming from the ERC project or on the policy related to the order of authors or relative contribution in joint publications. This is part of the full academic freedom that you will have during the ERC project. Importantly – this is true whether the publication is with an “official” collaborator mentioned in your application or not. The motivation to publish together should not be a consideration for including an individual as a collaborator in your ERC project.

**Below are a few examples of cases where the PI needs external support or input, and how to address them in the ERC application:**

**Supplementary / complementary support:** In case the PI is lacking a specific skill, which is supplementary or complementary to the core research, collaboration on that may be allowed. For example, adding a statistician to a biology-data-driven project. The PI will design and

execute the project and then analyze and generalize the outcomes of the project. Meanwhile, the statistician will add a unique and specific statistical expertise, enabling the PI to complete the work, better understand the data and contribute to the overall scientific excellence of the project. Notably, this is true in this case as long as the core of the research relates to the biological questions and methods. In contrast, if for example a dominant part of the core of the project is the development and implementation of novel statistical approaches, one could claim that this is no longer supplementary or complementary support. Rather, it is a collaborative effort, hence unwanted in ERC.

**Access to sites / data:** In some ERC projects, the PI might need to involve researchers or groups which essentially grant access to specific sites or data. This can be, for example, a unique archaeological site, natural habitat, a unique data-set from a clinical study, etc. Such access to sites or data, as long as it does not require actual research done by the group providing it, need not be presented as a collaboration in ERC. Instead, the PI can simply indicate that he/she has the necessary access to the sites or data, describing the logistic and technical details of this access.

**Access to unique research facilities:** Similar to the previous item, enabling access to unique research facilities or equipment (typically via existing collaboration with researchers in that facility), is not considered to be collaboration in ERC per se. The PI should only indicate that he/she has this kind of access. Notably, unlike in access to sites / data described above, this type of relation is typically more prone to extending beyond 'just access to the facility' and in fact includes shared work on core research, which is less welcome in ERC. The applicant must then clearly and honestly assess the nature of work with the peer enabling access to the unique research facility. Preferably, the work with the peer should only entail access to the facility. If this is indeed the case, then there is no need to label this as 'collaboration'. However, if the peer will actually contribute to the work in the core research tasks, this should be defined as

collaborations in ERC. Having done so, the applicant should realize the risk that this might not be welcome in ERC.

### **Tips for including collaborators in ERC**

Provided that you have identified a need for a collaborator in your ERC project for supplementary / complementary support, this is the recommended approach:

- Collaborators can come from anywhere in the world. There are no limitations to that. Therefore, we'd recommend choosing the best and most relevant researcher to work with. This will make the case for adding collaborations in ERC stronger.
- Instead of just stating the need (e.g. "a bioinformatician will be involved"), identify the specific individual that you want to collaborate with by name, institution and a short description of his/her capabilities. This will show the reviewers that you have a solid plan to implement these tasks in the best possible way.
- Explain clearly why you have selected this specific individual. Do your best to "sell the case" of adding collaborations. Remember your reviewers aren't looking for collaborations by default, so they need all the explanations relevant to this decision.
- Clearly describe the specific tasks done by the collaborator(s) and distinguish your contribution from theirs. Be sure to avoid the impression that substantial parts of the research is done by others. Eliminate any vagueness about the extent of their involvement.
- Budget considerations:
  - If the collaborator does not ask for funds – great! The budget plan is straightforward and is not affected by the collaboration.
  - If the collaborator does ask for funds – consult with the financial department of your institution on how to construct the budget accordingly. In that context, there is a technical issue about whether to include the collaborator's institution as an official beneficiary to the ERC grant application or not. Answering this

extends the scope of this article. [Contact us](#) for more details in case this issue is relevant to your case.

As fully explained above, collaborations in ERC must be handled in an entirely different approach in comparison to most other grants. As a special note, this issue is more prevalent in the case of [ERC Advanced Grant applicants](#), but is not limited to this category. Note that in the past, there was an option of having a Co-PI in the ERC Advanced Grant, but this does not exist anymore. Our general recommendation is to treat collaboration in ERC carefully. One must fully understand why and when a suggested collaboration is needed, and clearly describe it in the application, while maintaining the impression of leadership and independence.

For any further questions or assistance, please [refer to our available services](#) and reach out to us!