

ERC is not a grant for “fishing expedition” research

ERC has a bottom-up approach which means it can fund virtually *any topic* of research. However, this does not mean that it is open to *any type* of research. With the highly competitive written and unwritten rules of ERC, some research types simply fall short of the ERC requirements for success. Many times we come across one specific type of research used by researchers for their ERC project. Due to its popularity, and characteristics, we’ve even termed this type of research and will refer to it throughout this post as “fishing expedition” research. Experience shows that this specific type of research project can struggle to present a highly competitive and winning ERC grant proposal. In this article, we will focus on better understanding the issues with ERC and a “fishing expedition” type of research. Following that, we will share some of our top tips for adjusting “fishing expedition” research to successfully match the ERC’s competitive criteria.

What is “fishing expedition” research?

A “fishing expedition” is an attempt to discover information and generate new knowledge, without prior definition or hypothesis of what it may be. This type of research is essentially data-driven or observational research, where its main objective is to seek for meaningful insights, novel patterns or correlations within the data or subject of observation. This type of project tends to be mainly resource-dependent, while typically lacking a conceptual scientific risk. Outside the context of ERC, this is a perfectly legitimate and common way of research since it is

sometimes the only way to move forward for a given research question. In fact, many other grants welcome it. However, the story is quite different when it comes to ERC. Let us explain why.

How to spot a “fishing expedition”?

A typical “fishing expedition” research project would include the following “clues”:

- Data. The data is typically already available, there is access to it, or it can be generated.
- Data analysis. The main effort is in looking deep into the data and seeking patterns and correlations. In most cases, and provided that there exists substantial time and resources, it is highly probable to have meaningful findings in the data.
- Deductive reasoning. In a typical “fishing expedition” research project, a theory or hypothesis corresponding to the patterns or correlations would be an outcome of the project, rather than the driving force of the project articulated in detail in the project proposal.

Why “fishing expedition” research is less welcome in ERC

The official mission statement of ERC declares that ERC is looking for high-risk, high-gain, frontier research. Experience shows that there are additional crucial, yet

‘undocumented’, features required in ERC, such as the hypothesis-driven research and non-incremental work.

That being said, the first reason a “fishing expedition” research is less welcome in ERC is the lack of high risk involved in this type of research. The typical structure exposes a general lack of conceptual scientific risk. There may be operational and logistical risks involved, to the extent of being resource-intensive, but these usually do not constitute the high risk that the ERC is looking for. In most ERC review panels, the requirement of having a real conceptual high risk prevails, and our ongoing recommendation is to comply with this important requirement.

Closely linked to the expectation for conceptual high-risk, is the ERC’s expectation for hypothesis-driven research. This expectation is quite prevalent and common to many ERC review panels, even in disciplines where hypothesis-driven projects are quite uncommon. In contrast to this expectation, fishing expeditions by definition lack a hypothesis about possible findings and are not guided by a theoretical framework. We acknowledge that there are disciplines and projects in which hypothesis-driven research is not possible or needed for success in ERC, given that they do have conceptual novelty, high risk and associated theoretical framework. In the latter cases we would not recommend forcing a hypothesis structure, as it simply won’t work.

Arguably, access to data, or the opportunity to observe, is not unique to one researcher. Being a personal, investigator-driven grant, given to creative researchers,

the ERC also expects that proposals are original and unique to the applicant, and not such that can be proposed by others in the field. The hypothesis is expected to reflect that as well. When thinking of data-driven or observational research which lack a clear and original hypothesis on what might be found – the definition of a fishing expedition – this uniqueness and creativity is substantially diminished.

Following the high-risk and hypothesis-driven research requirements is the issue of non-incremental research. We know from experience that many “fishing expedition” research proposals are considered to be incremental as well by the ERC reviewers.

Can we adjust a data-driven project to match the ERC criteria?

First of all and most important – there is no replacement for a true conceptual high risk. Given that conceptual high risk research can be established, data-driven projects can sometimes be adjusted to meet the elusive ERC criteria. The means to do that may require counter-intuitive actions:

- Presenting a theoretical framework to the project. The theory should be unique, original, comprehensive, challenging and conceptually novel. It is crucial to consider the competition and state-of-the art in this regard.
- If possible, present a strong and clear hypothesis. The presented hypothesis will be beneficial even if proven false. As a rule of thumb, we advise the hypothesis to be predictive rather than descriptive. It should suggest the expected specific knowledge that may be concluded from the data.

- Both the theoretical framework and the hypothesis must be based on preliminary findings, but without suggesting that the project is completely feasible (recall the high-risk attribute). In case there is a chance that the project outcome will eventually overlap or be very similar to the preliminary results, this may indicate that the knowledge gap is not as big as one would expect from an ERC project.

It is important to keep in mind that while ERC is open to any topic of research, the same does not go for all types of research projects. Having a thorough understanding of the issues that may come from a “fishing expedition” type of research can tremendously help in shaping a project proposal in line with what ERC reviewers are expecting. In this respect, we also strongly recommend not to recycle past grants when it comes to applying to ERC. Though a “fishing expedition” project may be well suited for many different grants, the same cannot be said about ERC.