



Changes to application  
processes to reduce  
likelihood of bias in  
outcomes: An ERC  
case study

## Introduction

Funding organisations are increasingly working to address inequalities in the grant life cycle. However, until recently, less attention has been paid to inequalities at the pre-award stage – which includes announcing opportunities, and preparing, submitting, and reviewing applications. A 2022-23 project on this topic, led by the [Elizabeth Blackwell Institute](#) at the University of Bristol with support from [MoreBrains Cooperative](#), resulted in [11 concrete recommendations](#) for how funders and institutions could help improve equality, diversity, inclusion, and transparency in the process of applying for research funding. Subsequent work with the Declaration on Open Research Assessment ([DORA](#)) funder discussion group identified [three priority recommendations](#) for funding organisations. This case study has been developed as part of a follow-up University of Bristol-funded project focusing specifically on how funders can implement some of these recommendations.

The [European Research Council](#) (ERC) responded to a call by DORA for examples of work currently being carried out by funding organisations on changes to application processes to reduce the likelihood of bias in outcomes. This case study focuses on the ERC's work in this area, to assess and revise their evaluation procedures and the corresponding information that the organisation requests from applicants, as part of their ongoing process to ensure a fair and transparent evaluation process.

This case study is based on information provided by the ERC by email, the document [Evaluation of research proposals: the why and what of the ERC's recent changes](#), and a 30-minute interview with Nicola Spaldin (Professor, ETH Zurich and Member of the ERC Scientific Council), who has also reviewed it for accuracy.

## About the ERC

The ERC, set up by the European Union in 2007, funds researchers of any nationality to run projects based across Europe. The mission of the ERC is to encourage the highest quality research in Europe through competitive funding, and to support investigator-driven frontier research across all fields based on scientific excellence.

## The challenge

The [ERC Scientific Council](#) continuously scrutinises the ERC evaluation processes, solicits feedback from chairs and members of the ERC evaluation panels, welcomes input from the scientific community, and follows the debate on research assessment. The Scientific Council shared the concern that research assessment systems sometimes use inappropriate and narrow methods to assess the quality, performance, and impact of research and researchers. They decided to take an encompassing and structured look at research assessment in general, establish their own position, and consider possible changes to the evaluation processes used by the ERC. The Scientific Council defined three tasks: first to decide which characteristics and qualities of the proposed project and the applicant should be considered; second to decide how to evaluate those characteristics and qualities; and third to assign relative weights to the different characteristics and qualities.

## The outcome

The primary change has been to place a stronger emphasis on the groundbreaking nature of the research ideas contained in the proposal, with the assessment of the researcher focused primarily on ensuring that they have the expertise and capacity to successfully execute the project.

To reflect this change, the application template was substantially revised. The curriculum vitae and track record, previously two separate documents, were combined. The new template has three sections – personal details, research achievements and peer recognition, and additional information. The number of research achievements is limited to 10, and the type of research output is deliberately left open to include, for example, publications, preprints, expeditions, code, or any other research achievement considered relevant in the applicant's domain of research. For each entry, the applicant is encouraged to explain in a brief narrative how it has advanced the field.

While proposals will continue to be evaluated on the sole criterion of scientific excellence, with these changes, applicants can now provide a more holistic and fuller account of their research career and contributions for the panels to consider.

## Measuring progress

The changes were first announced in December 2022 and were implemented in the 2024 Work Programme. The effects of the changes will be closely monitored and could be refined in future following feedback from the applicants, panel members, scientific officers of the ERC Executive Agency, and the scientific community.

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