UKRO Horizon 2020 Condensed

European Research Council (ERC) Synergy Grants

What is the ERC and who should apply?

The ERC funds ambitious 'frontier research' proposals submitted by a Principal Investigator (PI), supported by a team if required, in any area of research and without predefined priorities. The ERC aims to fund the best research undertaken by the best researchers in Europe, and excellence is the only evaluation criterion (excellence both of the PI and excellence of the research project).

ERC-supported research should aim to broaden knowledge, and the proposed research should aim high, both in terms of the envisaged research achievements and in the originality of the proposed approaches. Proposals can involve new, ground-breaking or unconventional methodologies, whose risky outlook is justified by the possibility of a major breakthrough with an impact beyond a specific research area. Interdisciplinary proposals are also encouraged.

What are Synergy Grants?

ERC Synergy Grants are intended to enable **between two and four Principal Investigators** and their teams to bring together complementary skills, knowledge, and resources in new ways, in order to jointly address ambitious research problems. Synergy Grants may be awarded up to a maximum of **€14 million** for a period of **6 years.**

One of the Principal Investigators must be designated as the Corresponding PI. The PIs can be hosted at one or more host institutions across EU Member States/Associated Countries for the purposes of the Synergy Grant, and there is no requirement for any specific configuration. One of the PIs can be hosted in a third country (non-EU Member State/non-Associated Country), but they cannot be the Corresponding PI and their institution must be able to sign the grant agreement.

Applications are expected from groups of innovative and active Principal Investigators who can provide competitive track records befitting to their career stage, and each must present an early achievement track-record or a 10-year track-record, whichever is most appropriate for their career stage (aligning with the track record requirements for the other ERC Frontier Grants). Applicant Principal Investigators must demonstrate **the synergies, complementarities and added value that could lead to breakthroughs that would not be possible through the individual Principal Investigators working alone.**

What is the background to Synergy Grants?

The ERC previously ran two pilot Synergy Grant calls, in 2012 and 2013. The demand for Synergy Grants in these previous two calls far exceeded the resources allocated to the scheme, (€150 million per call), with the ERC receiving 697 and 427 proposals in 2012 and 2013 respectively. The success rate for these calls was 1.5% for the 2012 call and 3% in 2013. In total, 24 projects involving 83 principal investigators were funded for between five and six years. These projects were funded across the breadth of research areas: 11 in physical science and engineering, 9 in life sciences, and 4 in social science and humanities. Six of the 24 projects funded included a UK host institution.

Following these pilot calls, in 2014 the ERC Scientific Council established an ad hoc group tasked to assess the outcomes of the two pilot calls. After a year the group reported back to the Scientific Council, recommending reinstatement of the grant scheme and allocating to it at least €250 million annually.

The ERC Scientific Council agreed to re-introduce the scheme in the beginning of October 2016 at its plenary session in Dublin, Ireland. A Synergy Grant call formed part of the 2018 and 2019 ERC Work Programmes and the ERC have indicated that they intend to continue to run Synergy Grants as a standard part of each Work Programme.

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What will be funded in the Synergy Grants call?

For Synergy Grants, the ERC operates a single-stage submission and a three-stage evaluation process, which means that there will only be one deadline, at which a full proposal must be submitted. The latest ERC Work Programme indicates the allocated budget and approximate number of grants which are expected to be awarded for each scheme as well as the expected timings of the calls and the stages of the evaluation.

The ERC calls are open to all research areas (with the formal exception of nuclear fission and fusion), without any predefined thematic priorities. Proposals can be submitted to ERC along with several (4-6) keywords (the same as those provided for the other Frontier Grants), which will aid in assignment of proposals within the dynamic panel structure. The first step of the evaluation has the panel chairs evaluating proposals purely on feasibility, with successful proposals sent to one of five panels, composed according to the balance of proposals evaluated, for a further two steps of evaluation. The timeframe for evaluation of Synergy grant proposals is approximately 11 months from the call deadline.

Synergy Grants do not use the same resubmission restrictions as the other Frontier Grants. Restrictions from resubmission based on the evaluation results of Starting, Consolidator and Advanced grants do not prevent applicants from applying for a Synergy Grant. However, a B at stage 1 of a Synergy Grant application will prevent an applicant from applying for a Synergy Grant the following year, and a C will prevent them from applying for **any frontier grants** the following year and Synergy grants for the next two years.

Funding and project details

The ERC will reimburse direct eligible costs at 100% and provides a flat rate of 25% for indirect costs. All projects are led by a group of PIs, supported by teams if this is necessary for the project. Projects are based at host institutions selected by the PIs, which can be any type of organisation. These projects can be collaborative across institutions in different EU MS/AC, or all PIs can be based in one country or one institution, if appropriate to the specific project. One PI can be based at a host institution in a third country.

The PIs do not have to be based at their host institutions at the time the proposal is submitted. Similarly, a PI can apply for an ERC grant while outside Europe, as long as the project is undertaken at a host institution within Europe. This does not exclude fieldwork or other necessary project work which takes place outside Europe, and the proposal can address a 'non-European' issue. However, for Synergy Grants the PI must spend a minimum of 30% of their working time on the ERC-funded project and 50% of their time within Europe (excluding the one PI allowed to be based in a third country host-institution).

Relevant EU policy areas and developments

The ERC's policy and funding strategy are decided by an independent Scientific Council, consisting of 22 leading researchers. Although accountable to the European Commission, the ERC's mandate is to encourage the highest quality research in Europe via competitive funding and support investigator-driven frontier research across all fields. As a result, no other EU policy priorities influence the ERC's funding.

More information:

- European Commission Research and Innovation Participant Portal for:
    - **Calls for proposals**
    - **Work programmes**
- ERC website: **erc.europa.eu**
- ERC Synergy Grant resources: **https://erc.europa.eu/funding/synergy-grants**
- Information for Applicants Document for 2019 Synergy Grant Call: **http://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/other/guides_for_applicants/h2020-guide19-erc-syg_en.pdf**
- ERC website for summaries of ERC projects: **https://erc.europa.eu/projects-and-results/erc-funded-projects**
- ERC Synergy Grant project examples: **https://erc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document/file/Synergy_Grant_2012_list.pdf** (2012)
  https://erc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document/file/erc_2013_syg_results.pdf (2013)
  https://erc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document/file/erc_2018_syg_results.pdf (2018)
- Sign up to the UKRO Portal News to stay up to date on Horizon 2020 general developments, calls, events and results: **ukro.ac.uk**
- For specific questions, contact your UKRO European Advisor
- UK ERC NCP Helpdesk
    - Email: **erc-uk@bbsrc.ac.uk**
    - Phone: + 32 2 289 6121
    - **www.ukro.ac.uk/erc/**

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