

**UCL SLMS Consolidator Grant Information Event
20 November 2015, Haldane Room, Bloomsbury Campus**

**View from Consolidator Grant Review Panel Member:
Professor Patricia Salinas, Department of Cell and Developmental Biology**

DISCLAIMER This is the personal experience of a panel member from one ERC Review Panel, and is not an official guidance note. This document is confidential and should not be circulated, shared beyond UCL staff or placed on any externally accessible websites.

Background

- Member of Neuroscience Panel (LS5) for five years
- Participated in three review cycles to date (one year on, one year off model)
- Also previous member of MRC Neuroscience and Mental Health Board

The Review Process Step One (section B1) and Advice

- There are 17 members on this review panel with diverse expertise. Around three to four panel members are assigned to each application. Each of these panel members will review the application and give scores on excellence of i) PI and ii) research: 50% of score for PI and 50% of the score is assigned to the project. The total score is added and a ranking list is drawn. Highly competitive: need to score well on both fronts to get through the first stage.
- At first step, panel members will only see part B1 of the application. Here, the panel needs to see the novelty, ground-breaking nature, and feasibility. Some detail on methodology is needed in B1 to show feasibility, although the majority of detail is in B2. It is not a good idea to just make a short version of B2. Please note that part B1 should be written so that members of the panel who are not too close to the field of research understand the significance of the application.
- Section B1 is very important – don't rush it. The panel don't see B2 at the first review stage.
- After individual evaluation, scores are sent in and then the panel meets. The highest – mid scoring applications are discussed again to meet a common agreement and select a shortlist for interview.
- Over 90 applications were reviewed at step one in a single review cycle, all excellent. Eventually 30 were selected for interview at step two.
- At stage 1 (Part B1), each panel member has ~30-35 applications to review and one month to do it. Therefore panel members have to be strict in terms of time spent reviewing – and applicants should bear this in mind.
- Be very specific and clear in your writing. For example, panel members may decide to only do one PubMed search if they don't understand something in an application: after that if anything is not clear it will be detrimental for the application.
- Figures should be visible and clear, reviewers should not have to zoom in too much to see them. Include a legend to help the reviewer understand what the figure is about.

- Before even starting to write a grant, set up a “chalk talk” within your department. This will help you to improve your project, e.g. identify objectives that are not useful, make sure you are using the most forefront technologies etc.
- In terms of the number of publications needed e.g. as senior author, or corresponding author without PhD/postdoc advisor: there is no rule, but you are competing against a strong field and it will be assessed against the other candidates.

The Review Process Step Two (section B1 and B2) and Advice

- At the first review meeting, the panel decides who will be the expert external reviewers for each of the shortlisted applications.
- Panel members (assigned usually 3-4 per application) evaluate section B2 and score the applications again. This happens without having seen external reviewer comments.
- At B2 stage a major criteria they are assessing is feasibility. Unlike with a MRC grant where a lot of preliminary data would be needed for a new methodology, this isn't the case for ERC as they are prepared to accept high risk proposals. But it is true to say that some data would be needed.
- Scores are submitted. Panel members see the external reviewer comments and other panel member scores just before meeting again as a panel to interview candidates.
- In the interview a lot of questions will be related to the proposal and will be quite technical. You need to know your stuff, for example limitations of a new technique you are trying to apply, to the level of e.g. what promoter you will use to express a channel rhodopsin if that's not written into the application.
- The process can be very nerve wracking and challenging! A lot of people who are awarded the grant did not think they would be after the interview!
- It takes 4-5 weeks to hear whether you are awarded the grant.

General Advice and Discussion

- You can ask for additional €750K (on top of the €2M) but with this, and in general, be careful and don't be greedy with the budget, for example asking for a lot without a strong justification. Only ask for what you truly need for the project. If you do not have a strong justification for your budget request, in comparison with another application that is otherwise equally strong this could reduce your chances of success.
- You can and should use the Funding ID section to describe carefully how the ERC grant related to other grants you have (or are applying for), especially where subject area may seem similar from grant titles. Take this seriously as reviewers do look at it.
- You can also use the Funding ID section to justify / put into context the request for your time/salary on the ERC CoG grant, e.g. describe your time commitments to the other grants.
- The ERC does expect to see a good time commitment to a CoG, at least 40%. Reviewers don't view e.g. 50% compared to 100% PI time request any differently, so long as it is justified. Remember at consolidator stage you should already be independent and so would be expected to have some grant funding – bear this in mind if requesting 100% of your time.
- A project should not appear unfocussed or too broad. You should have interrelated but separate aims. You could [example given by Jason Mercer, ERC CoG awardee] pitch it by focussing your grant in a specific way on a general, widely applicable phenomenon.
- If you've got a Starting Grant already, there is no rule or judgement as to whether the subject for a Consolidator Grant application has to be in the same or different subject.