



FFG
Forschung wirkt.

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**GUIDELINES FOR EXPLORATORY
PROJECTS FOR PREPARING R&D&I
PROJECTS**

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Changes in comparison to the former version 3.2

- Chapter 5.1: Streamlined process for drawing up the funding contract
- Several textual clarifications for an improved comprehensibility

1 PREFACE

The FFG is your partner for research and development. These Guidelines are designed to support you in submitting your Exploratory Project. They explain:

- how to obtain funding
- what conditions must be met
- how the application process works

The goals and priorities, the budget and the submission deadlines that are relevant to your project are described in the corresponding call announcement.

2 GENERAL INFORMATION

2.1 What are Exploratory Projects?

Exploratory projects are designed to provide preparatory work for research, development and innovation projects (R&D&I). Their focus is on assessing the viability of potential future R&D&I projects and supporting concept development for planned flagship projects and innovation laboratories.

Exploratory projects may assess and analyse the potential of a project with the aim to facilitate decision-making through an objective and rational presentation of strengths and weaknesses as well as associated opportunities and threats. Another aim is to determine what resources would be required for implementation and what prospects of success the project would have (for definition see RTI Guidelines - [Themen-FTI-Richtlinie](#)).

To a minor extent, this may also include the organisation of workshops, stakeholder consultations etc., if this is required to achieve the goals of the exploratory project. It is also possible to include open innovation processes¹ in exploratory projects, as long as this supports their objectives.

If an exploratory project is submitted by a consortium the rights and duties must be stipulated in a Declaration of Cooperation.

The following criteria must be met:

- Maximum duration: 12 months
- Maximum funding: 200,000 euros
- Exploratory projects may be submitted by individual applicants or as a collaborative project involving several consortium partners.
- Large enterprises may only participate as part of a consortium.

¹ The term “**open innovation**” means opening the innovation process of organisations through active and strategic use of external sources in order to increase innovation potential. The open innovation concept describes the purposeful use of knowledge flows into and out of organisations using internal and external paths to market in order to generate innovation. [Chesbrough, H.W. (2003): Open Innovation: The new imperative for creating and profiting from technology, Boston: Harvard Business School Press, S. XXIV]

2.2 What demands are placed on the consortium?

The consortium must consist of at least one company with one or more partners that are independent of each other. Partners are independent, if they own less than 25% of capital or voting right of each other (for more information regarding affiliated entities see [SME definition](#)). In any case the consortium must include:

- at least 1 small or medium-sized enterprise (SME) (details see [SME definition](#)) or
- 1 research and knowledge dissemination organisation (research institution) or (research organisation – see [GBER 2014](#)) or
- 1 partner from another EU member state or contracting party to the EEA Agreement

If the exploratory project serves for the preparation of a flagship project, at least one enterprise must be represented in the consortium.

Additional criteria:

- The consortium leader must have a branch office in Austria
- The consortium leader submits the application for funding

The Declaration of Cooperation regulates the collaboration within the consortium. A sample [declaration of cooperation template](#) is available to help you in drawing up a Declaration of Cooperation.

The conditions to the consortium have still to be fulfilled at the end of the project. If there are changes during the project not according to the demanded consortium structure, a reclaim of the funding is possible.

2.3 What are the responsibilities of the consortium leader?

The consortium leader has the following responsibilities throughout the project duration:

- project management
- communications with the funding agency and the project partners
- examining the reports and accounts provided by the consortium partners

In your capacity as consortium leader you confirm to us that:

- you manage and distribute the funding yourself
- you communicate any changes in due time
- you provide accounts and reports in accordance with the Funding Contract

Before payment of the 1st funding rate, the consortium leader confirms that a declaration of cooperation is existing.

In addition, the consortium leader confirms that:

- The accounted costs are explicitly assigned to the funded project.
- Project costs are used according to the funding contract. The project content corresponds to the approved funding

2.4 Who is eligible to receive funding?

Legal entities, partnerships and sole traders that are not part of the Austrian federal administration are eligible to receive funding.

The following are eligible for funding:

- Companies of any legal form
- Institutions of research and knowledge dissemination
 - Universities²
 - Universities of applied sciences
 - Non-university research institutions
 - Technology transfer institutions, innovation agents and other research-oriented organisations such as associations with a relevant purpose
- Other non-commercial institutions
 - Local authorities and autonomous bodies (Note: Activities of local authorities falling within their statutory mandate are not eligible for funding)
 - Non-profit making organisations such as NPOs³

The following may participate but may not receive funding:

- Subcontractors: they are not partners within the definition of a Cooperative R&D Project. They provide defined tasks for partners which are listed under the cost category “third-party costs” and are not entitled to exploit the project results.
- Other participants: these are persons or institutions that do not receive funding, but are mentioned in the Funding Contract, including the scope of their participation. Their rights and duties are also stipulated by contract. Their participation needs to be justified in the application. Potential “other participants” may also include persons or institutions of the Austrian federal administration

² The smallest possible unit of a university is an institute of the university or a organisation comparable to a UOG 2002/§20 organisation unit. It is a precondition that the participating organisation unit (institute or comparable unit) is authorised with corresponding mandate according to UOG 2002/§ 27. Units below (for example working groups) can not act as project partners.

³ “Non-profit making organisations” do not distribute profits to their owners, members or other natural persons or legal entities in accordance with their legal status or articles of association.

Not eligible:

Due to incompatibility, organisations which have, in the name of the FFG or the funding authority, contributed essentially to the evaluation of the programme or the design of the programme for this specific call within the last three years, are not allowed to participate in this call in any way.

If this refers to different units of an organisation, a participation in this specific call has to be coordinated with the programme management of the FFG. In any case, it has to be explained that no conflict of interest can occur.

The FFG reserves the right to exclude applicants due to incompatibilities.

2.5 Can partners from outside Austria participate?

A consortium may have partners from outside Austria.

Partners from outside the EU may also receive funding unless this is specifically excluded in the relevant call.

The following conditions apply:

- The non-Austrian partners create benefit for the Austrian consortium partners and/or Austria as a business and research location;
- This benefit is explicitly indicated in the application for funding;
- Grants paid to partners from outside Austria do not exceed 20% of the total funding amount;
- The evaluation committee recommends providing funding to the non-Austrian partner;
- The partner from outside Austria proves its credit-worthiness and liquidity in accordance with the criteria applied to Austrian partners prior to contract formation;
- The non-Austrian partner accepts the FFG's obligation and entitlement to review the project as specified in the Funding Contract and submits relevant documentary evidence in German or English.

Alternatively, non-Austrian organisations may cover their costs from own funds and/or from funds provided by their home country. Collaborative agreements for joint funding are in place with several European and non-European countries.

The European **EUREKA** initiative, for example, provides funding support for cross-border collaborations across programmes. The call announcement will specify whether these collaborative agreements can be used for a specific Cooperative R&D Project.

Organisations from outside Austria may also be involved as subcontractors.

2.6 How much support is granted?

Support is paid in the form of non-repayable grants and is limited to a **maximum of EUR 200.000** per project.

The funding rate varies depending on the type of partner:

- The funding rate for enterprises is based on the company size
- The funding rate for research institutions is shown in table 1, provided that the contribution involves a non-commercial activity.
- If the contribution to the project of a research institution or other institution involves a commercial activity the funding rates are the same as those for enterprises.
- It has to be stated in the application if additional funding is granted by any other funding institution. If multiple funding is gained the cumulative funding must not exceed the European funding limit – funding from different funding authorities - may not override the cumulative funding height of the legal European legal funding aid limits (see [GBER: Regulation \(EU\) Nr. 651/2014, OJ L 187/48](#)).

Funding rates

Table 1: Funding rates

Type of organisation	Funding rate
Small enterprise	70 %
Medium-sized enterprise	60 %
Large enterprise	50 %
Research institutions (non-commercial activities)	80 %
Non-commercial institutions (non-commercial activities)	80 %

Non-commercial activities of research institutions include:

- primary activities such as education
- research and development, independent or as part of an effective collaboration
- knowledge dissemination and transfer (see [Community framework](#))

Non-commercial activities of non-commercial institutions include contributions to R&D projects related to the development of products, services and systems, where they act, e.g., as public agencies.

The company size is to be determined according to the SME definition as specified by EU competition law: see information on [SME definition](#)

2.7 What costs are eligible?

Eligible costs must be allocable directly to the project. This means that:

- they are incurred additionally to the normal operating costs during the funding period
- they are in accordance with the Funding Contract
- they can be evidenced by receipts

The earliest possible date for the start of the project is after submission of the application for funding.

For details on the eligibility of costs see the [Cost Guidelines](#).

Special provisions for Exploratory Projects:

Third-party costs are limited to 50% of the total costs per partner. Any excess must be justified in the Project Description. This limit does not apply to services provided by affiliated companies which are shown as third-party costs.

2.8 What about intellectual property rights?

Intellectual property rights relating to the project results belong to the consortium. The provisions of the [Community framework for state aid for research and development and innovation](#), 2014/C 198/01, apply to collaborations between commercial companies and research institutions.

This document stipulates that the intellectual property rights are to be allocated to the research institutions in a manner which adequately reflects their work, contributions and interests. If the rights are assigned to the companies involved, the research institutions shall receive compensation equivalent to the market price.

Please note in this context that expenditure for the protection of intellectual property (IPR) is eligible for funding. This includes costs for patent applications and patent searches. Patent maintenance costs are not eligible for funding.

2.9 What criteria are used to assess applications for funding?

Applications for funding are evaluated according to 4 criteria:

- 1 Quality of the project
- 2 Suitability of the applicant / project partners
- 3 Benefit and exploitation
- 4 Relevance to the call

The tables below show the relevant sub-criteria. In the course of the assessment, points will be assigned to each criterion. Projects not reaching the stated threshold value for a certain criterion will be rejected. Reaching zero points in one of the sub-criteria of the 4th criteria "Relevance to the Call" the project will be rejected as well.

Funding criteria

Table 2: Criterion „Quality of the project“

1. Quality of the project	threshold 18, max. points 30
1.1 How well are the state of the art (level of knowledge/technology) and/or the commercially available products and services described and how plausible is the assessment?	6
1.2 To what extent does the complexity of the problem or the envisaged innovation goal justify carrying out an exploratory project?	15
1.3 What is the quality of planning based on the following criteria? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Transparent structure of work packages – Transparent presentation of costs – Transparent description of work packages according to the scope of work – Adequate relationship between costs and work plan – Adequate scope of project management – Provisions for risk management – Realistic implementation of plan (duration, deadlines, milestones, results) – Clarity and coherence of cooperative relationships (if applicable) 	6

1. Quality of the project	threshold 18, max. points 30
<p>1.4 If the project relates to people:</p> <p>To what extent have gender-specific topics been taken into account in project planning?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Quality of the analysis of gender-specific topics – Integration in the methodical approach of the project <p>Information: If a person or a group of persons are subject of a research project or if the results of a research project affect people, an according research design is necessary. In case the justifiable conclusion of analysis of gender relevance results in no gender relevance in its content, full points have to be given.</p>	3

Table 3: Criterion „Suitability of the applicant / project partners“

2. Suitability of the applicant / project partners	threshold 12, max. points 20
2.1 Does the applicant / consortium have the scientific, technical, economic and management skills required to achieve the project goals?	8,5
2.2 To what extent does the applicant / do the consortium partners have the required qualifications and resources to ensure successful implementation of the (cooperative) project?	8
2.3 Does the composition of the project team reflect the aim to improve the gender balance in the sector?	3,5

Table 4: Criterion „Benefit and exploitation“

3. Benefit and exploitation	threshold 18; max. points 30
<p>3.1 In what way do the planned results of the exploratory project support decision making for further RDI projects in the following dimensions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – strength-weakness analysis of the innovation approach – opportunities and threats – necessary resources 	16

3. Benefit and exploitation	threshold 18; max. points 30
3.2 What potential positive impact will the planned results of the exploratory project have in the organisations involved and beyond, for example by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – expanding existing R&D activities to include new fields of application – opening up new business fields etc. – creating a benefit for the relevant target group – if people are affected by the exploitation of the project results: Consideration of gender-specific issues in exploiting the economic potential 	14

Table 5: Criterion „Relevance to the Call“

4. Relevance to the Call	threshold 12, max. points 20
4.1 To what extent does the project address the call topics?	8
4.2 To what extent does the project contribute to achieving the goals of the call?	8
4.3 To what extent does the funding influence the project positively in one or more of the following dimensions? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Implementation: the funding enables the project to be implemented in the first place – Acceleration: the funding accelerates implementation – Scope: the funding increases the scope of the project – Range: the funding makes the project more ambitious through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – a more radical innovation approach – higher risk – new or extended collaborations – long-term strategic orientation 	4

2.10 What documents are required for submission?

Project applications may only be submitted electronically via [eCall](#).

Please upload the following documents via the eCall upload function

- Online Cost-Plan (“Kostenplan”)
- Project Description: descriptive part of the application (upload as pdf file)

Attachments to the electronic application

- Annual statement of accounts (balance sheet, profit and loss account) from the past 2 financial years
- [Declaration of SME Status](#) for associations, sole traders and non-Austrian companies

If any additional documents or attachments are required, this will be specified in the form for the project description (application form).

If the project involves partners outside Austria, collaborative agreements with European or non-European countries may require the submission of documents that cannot be uploaded via eCall. The relevant information will be given in the call announcement. In individual cases additional supporting documents may be requested.

The call announcement also specifies the language in which applications are to be submitted, which is usually German and/or English

2.11 Is it necessary to mention other projects?

To support the assessment of the content of the project, the application for funding must list those projects that have been or are being publicly funded by Austrian authorities and/or EU grants, provided these are:

- Pre-projects which deliver results for this project
- Ongoing or finished projects (of the last 3 years) related to the applied project

The multiple acceptance of already funded costs or part of costs is not possible. The proposed project must be clearly distinguished from projects that have already received funding.

2.12 Is scientific integrity ensured?

Funding may only be granted to applicants who demonstrate high scientific integrity during application and project execution.

The FFG is a member of the Austrian Agency for Research Integrity – [OeAWI](#) and is thus committed to safeguarding good scientific practice.

If we suspect a lack of scientific integrity or misconduct in the course of the formal checks or of the proposal check, the relevant documents may be forwarded to the OeAWI's Commission for Scientific Integrity. The OeAWI will then decide whether to initiate an independent investigation procedure and, if necessary, will undertake the necessary investigations.

If the investigation reveals a lack of scientific integrity or misconduct (e.g. plagiarism), the application has to be rejected due to formal reasons. If funding has already been granted, the funding must be reduced, retained or reclaimed.

3 SUBMISSION PROCEDURE

3.1 What is the procedure for submission?

Applications must be electronically submitted via [eCall](#) before the deadline.

The funding application may not be submitted until all partners have submitted their partner applications via eCall.

How does it work?

- Download application form via eCall and fill it
- Fill in the online calculation – the system verifies, if the funding requirements are met (e.g. max. funding, max. size of the project)
- Upload the required documents
- Finalise application in eCall and click “Submit application” (“Einreichung abschicken”)
- Upon successful submission, an acknowledgement will be sent automatically by email
- Not necessary: additional postal submission of duly executed copy

Not possible:

- Resubmission or modification of individual parts of the application form
- Revision after submission

The application documents are to be submitted by the consortium leader or by a duly authorised representative. The FFG may request evidence that this person is authorised to represent the consortium leader. If you are unable to provide such evidence the FFG reserves the right to reject the application for formal reasons.

An [eCall tutorial](#) is available.

3.2 How will confidential project data be used?

The FFG processes the personal data of funding applicants and funding recipients provided by the data subjects as part of the application for funding, data collected by the FFG for the purpose of concluding the funding contract, and data generated by searches in the transparency portal according to Sec. 32 (5) of the Transparency Database Act (TDBG 2012) for the following purposes:

- Processing of the funding application and assessment of whether the general and specific funding requirements have been met,
- Conclusion of the funding contract and (if a funding contract has been concluded) compliance with the relevant contractual obligations, including but

not limited to administration of the funding payments and monitoring of compliance with funding requirements,

- Compliance with statutory obligations, including but not limited to reporting obligations and control purposes in order to avoid double funding (i.e. Sec. 38 in conjunction with 18, 27 ARR, as well as Sec. 12 FTFG and Sec. 9 FFG-G).

The legal basis of processing is therefore Art. 6 (1) (b) GDPR, i.e. performance of a contract, and Art 6 (1) (c) GDPR, i.e. compliance with legal obligations.

The personal data will be disclosed to the following institutions in compliance with legal obligations.

- the federal ministries as owners of the FFG, other contracting authorities for the management of funding measures (e.g. other federal ministries, regional governments, KLIEN)
- third parties, which may include the Court of Audit, EU bodies, and other federal or regional funding agencies

National and international experts will get access to the submitted documents for the evaluation of the proposals – see chapter 4.2. Such experts act as processors on behalf of the FFG and are required to take technical and organisational measures to ensure data security and data confidentiality

Project content and results may only be published (e.g. on the website or in social media forums) with the consent of the funding recipient (Art 6 (1) (a) GDPR) unless the FFG has a legal obligation to do so.

The FFG must also obtain the consent of the data subject for any other data use exceeding these provisions.

The FFG is under a legal obligation to maintain secrecy concerning company and project information pursuant to Sec. 9 (4) of the Austrian Research Promotion Agency Act (FFG-G, Federal Law Gazette BGBl. I No. 73/2004).

The FFG will ensure a level of security appropriate to the risk in terms of confidentiality, integrity, availability and resilience of the systems by implementing technical and organisational measures within the meaning of Art. 32 GDPR that are sufficient and appropriate for protecting the data against accidental or unlawful destruction, loss and unauthorised access.

Further information about ensuring the confidentiality and security of personal data during the course of the project is available in the eCall tutorial

4 ASSESSMENT AND DECISION

4.1 What is the formal check?

In the formal check the application is examined for formal correctness and completeness.

You will be notified of the result of the formal check within 4 weeks via an eCall message:

- If the formal criteria are not met and the deficiencies cannot be corrected, the application for funding will not enter the subsequent steps of the procedure.
- If the deficiencies can be corrected, you may rectify these problems within a reasonable period of time

Should it transpire after the formal check that incorrect information has been given, the funding application may also be removed from consideration at a subsequent point in the procedure.

The relevant **checklist** can be found in the Project Description template.

4.2 How is the evaluation procedure organised?

The documents submitted will be reviewed by national and international experts based on the criteria given in Chapter 2.9.

An evaluation committee will make a recommendation on funding taking into account the written reviews.

It is possible to exclude reviewers (individuals or staff of particular organisations) in justified cases. eCall contains an entry field for this purpose.

FFG experts will check the financial potential (credit rating and liquidity) of the participating enterprises. According to the European legal basis of this funding, the General block exemption regulation (EU) N°651/2014 of 17 June 2014, it is not possible to provide funding to undertakings in difficulty.

Additional recommendations and requirements may be formulated in the course of the assessment. Recommendations are non-binding remarks of the evaluation committee, which should support the consortium in the implementation of the project.

Requirements are binding, see Chapter 4.2.

4.3 Who takes the funding decision?

The funding decision is taken by the responsible Federal Ministers on the basis of the funding recommendation made by the evaluation committee.

5 FUNDING PROCEDURE

5.1 How is the Funding Contract concluded?

In case of a positive funding decision, the FFG will send the beneficiary / consortium a document or a view in the eCall system with the most important basic parameters of the funding contract (e.g. amount of funding granted, amount of eligible costs, start and ending date of the funding period, reporting obligations and possible binding requirements).

After acceptance of the document or the view within the given deadline, the FFG prepares the funding contract and delivers it to the beneficiary / consortium. The beneficiary / consortium returns the stamped and signed funding contract. Thereby the funding contract is valid in law. Until then, there is no title for being funded.

5.2 How are requirements taken into account?

Binding requirements may be formulated in the course of the assessment of the funding application.

Two types of additional requirements are possible:

- Requirements that must be met prior to the conclusion of a funding contract.
- Requirements that must be met by the consortium during the course of the project.

These requirements shall form an integral part of the contract.

5.3 How are the instalments of funding paid?

The first installment will be paid once the requirements have been met and the Funding Contract has been signed. Payments for collaborative exploratory projects are made to the bank account specified by the consortium leader.

Subsequent instalments will be paid in accordance with the progress of the project:

- once the interim reports and interim accounts have been approved
- (where necessary) once additional requirements have been met
- according to the FFG instalment scheme

If the interim reports indicate a delay in project progress or if the costs are below budget the instalment can be reduced.

The payment of funding during the course of the project does not imply approval of the costs.

FFG instalment scheme

Table 6: FFG instalment scheme

Number of reports and instalments	max. 12 months project duration
Number of reports (final report)	1
1st instalment in % of funding amount at contract conclusion	50 %
Final instalment up to % of funding amount	50 %

5.4 What reports and accounts are required?

- Within 3 months of the conclusion of the project a final report, a (publishable) summary and the final accounts must be presented, again via the eCall reporting function. The publication of a summary may be omitted in case of incompatibility with commercial exploitation, confidentiality obligations because of security reasons or because of data protection regulations.
- If the project is aborted during the project term the consortium must submit a final report and final accounts. The FFG is entitled to reclaim money if the funding already paid exceeds the eligible costs

The reports and accounts must meet the following requirement:

- They contain the description of activities and in addition the cost statements of all consortium partners who are mentioned in the funding contract.
- Reports must be prepared using the eCall templates

Support of public relations: The funding recipients agree to work together with the FFG and the responsible ministries to support PR work, if required. This includes in particular the provision of non-confidential project information and images for electronic dissemination portals and other media purposes.

5.5 How should changes to the project be communicated?

Any changes to contractual points such as project content, consortium partners, costs, deadlines or funding period must be substantiated and submitted for approval:

- via eCall message
- in the final report

All relevant documents should be uploaded as an attachment to the eCall message or sent by post. Any modifications to the contract parameters require the approval of the FFG

Immediate notification is required for:

- substantial changes to the project
- changes to consortium partners such as new ownership structure or insolvency proceedings

The following changes should be communicated in the final report:

- cost reallocations between cost categories, e. g. material costs to personnel costs
- cost reallocations between partners

5.6 Can the funding period be extended?

If the project goals have not been achieved and the approved level of costs has not been exceeded, the funding period may, in exceptional cases, be extended for up to 6 months on a cost-neutral basis.

The following requirements must be met:

- the funding recipients are not responsible for the delay
- the project is still eligible for funding
- an eCall application for extension has been submitted within the approved funding period

5.7 What happens after the conclusion of the project?

The consortium submits a final report and final accounts after the end of the project. The FFG Project Controlling & Audit Division will examine whether the funding has been used appropriately. The audit will establish the final level of eligible costs.

You will receive the result of the audit in writing:

- In the event of a positive result, the appropriate use of the funding will be confirmed.
- In the event of a negative result, procedures may be initiated to secure repayment of funding

Funding details: The final instalment will be transferred once the specified cost has been reached. If the project is underspent the level of funding will be reduced accordingly. The funding amount may also be reduced for scientific reasons, as well as on formal and legal grounds.

For more information about eligible costs, see the [Cost Guidelines](#).

6 ANNEX

6.1 Call milestones (up to first instalment)

Figure 1: Milestones of a Call

