Promoting Innovation.

VERSION 5.2
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GUIDELINES FOR EXPLORATORY PROJECTS FOR ELABORATING IDEAS AND PREPARING R&D&I PROJECTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

Changes from version 5.1

- Sections 2.4: Rephrasing of specifications of organisations not eligible to participate
- Section 3.3: Addition of a new document section on disclosure requirements and freedom of information

1 PREFACE

The FFG is your partner for research and development. These Guidelines are designed to support you in submitting your Exploratory Project for elaborating ideas and preparing an R&D&I project. They describe:

- 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 THE BASIS FOR GETTING FUNDED

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 elaborating ideas for disruptive and radical innovations, supporting the concept phase if increased complexity is involved, and assessing the viability of potential future R&D&I projects.

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 General Block Exemption Regulation (GBER): Regulation (EU) No. 651/2014, OJ L 187/48, extended by the Regulation (EU) 2023/1315 from 23rd June 2023, Art. 2 subpar. 87).

This may also include the organisation of workshops, stakeholder consultations etc., if this is required to prepare the R&D&I project. It is also possible to include open innovation processes[1] as well as the preparation of a development or implementation concept in exploratory projects. In specific cases, i.e. if there is increased complexity involved and it is prerequisite for the preparation of an R&D&I project, the goal of an exploratory project can also be the root cause analysis and the feasibility check by means of functional patterns or laboratory prototypes.

It is not possible within an exploratory project to do research and development (TRL 1-8) in the sense of resolving technological and/or scientific uncertainties.

The following requirements must be fulfilled by an exploratory project:

- Maximum duration: 24 months
- Maximum funding: 500,000 euros
- Exploratory projects may be submitted by individual applicants or as a collaborative project involving several consortium partners.
- If an exploratory project is submitted by a consortium the rights and duties are stipulated in the funding contract.
- 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]

Note that there might be call-specific restrictions with respect to the maxium duration or the maximum funding.

2.2 What demands are placed on the consortium?

The consortium of a collaborative project must consist of at least one company with one or more participants that are independent of each other. Participants 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 organisation – see GBER) or
- 1 participating organisation 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 requirements to the consortium:

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

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 participants
- 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

Moreover, the consortium leader confirms that:

- the costs charged can be clearly attributed to the project
- the project costs and content are in accordance with the approval

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 particularly eligible for funding:

- Companies of any legal form (e.g. AG, GmbH, KG, OG, etc.), but principally not partnerships under civil law (GesbR)
- Institutions of research and knowledge dissemination
  - Universities[2]
  - Universities of applied sciences
  - Non-university research institutions
  - Technology transfer institutions, innovation agents and other research-oriented organisations (e.g. cluster organisations, associations with a relevant purpose)
- Other legal entities
  - Non-research oriented associations
  - Local authorities and autonomous bodies (Note: Activities of local authorities falling within their statutory mandate are not eligible for funding)

The following may participate but may not receive funding:

- Subcontractors: they are not participants within the definition of a cooperative Exploratory Project. They provide defined tasks for project participants 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

Not eligible:

Organisations which have been commissioned by the FFG, the funding authority, or as part of an EU project (including third-party providers) and could consequently secure an advantage related to the specific call – whether through involvement in a study, evaluation, the design, or in another manner – are not eligible to participate for reasons of conflict of interest unless their participation has been coordinated

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

with the FFG Call Management and any related concerns have been clarified. In this case, the measures taken to eliminate the conflict of interest must be demonstrated.

The FFG reserves the right to exclude organisations from the call due to a conflict of interest.

2.5 Can partners from outside Austria participate?

A consortium may have participants 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 partners from outside Austria prove their credit-worthiness and liquidity in accordance with the criteria applied to Austrian partners prior to contract formation;
- The non-Austrian partners accept the FFG's obligation and entitlement to review the project as specified in the Funding Contract and submit 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 calls. The call announcement will specify whether these collaborative agreements can be used for a specific Exploratory 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 500.000** 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 and other institutions is shown in table 1, provided that the contribution involves a non-economic activity.
- If the contribution to the project of a research institution or other institution involves an economic 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 – funding from different funding authorities – is gained the cumulative funding must not exceed the European legal funding aid limits (see GBER).

Funding rates

Table 1: Funding rates

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

Non-economic 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-economic activities[3] of non-economic institutions include contributions to R&D projects related to the development of products, services and systems, where they act, e.g., as public or private end user organisations.

[3] Any activity consisting in offering goods and services on a market is generally an economic activity regardless whether there is an intent to realise a profit or not (cf. section 2 of the Commission Notice on the notion of State aid, OJ 2016/C 262 from 19th July 2016).

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 participating organisation. 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.

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 project participants
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 points)	**max. points 30**
1.1 What does the novelty of the idea or the approach consist in that the exploratory project is meant to determine? To what extent does the **innovation content** exceed the state of the art, existing products, services, processes or existing knowledge?	**10**
1.2 **To what extent does the uncertainty or complexity** of the idea or the approach of the potential further RDI project **justify** the **need to implement the exploratory project**? Have the project goals for the exploratory project been clearly defined? Have the risks in the work packages been adequately addressed and corresponding measures provided?	**5**
1.3 **Quality of planning:** Based on the planning, is it realistic to achive the goals of the exploratory project? Are the time schedule and the planning of resources and costs adequate for achieving the project goals?	**5**
1.4 If the content of the exploratory project or the idea or approach of the potential further RDI project affect people: To what extent have gender-specific topics been taken into account in the planning process of the exploratory project? – Quality of the analysis of the gender-specific topics – Consideration in the methodological approach of the project (more information can be found here) Projects in which content and focus have no gender relevance according to this analysis will score full points in this subcategory.	**5**

1. Quality of the project (threshold = 18 points)	max. points 30
1.5 To what extent does the idea or approach of the potential further RDI project take into account **sustainability goals** (ecological, social, economic), in particular in terms of climate neutrality? - How is sustainability, in particular climate neutrality, taken into account in the planning and implementation of the project and is the methodological approach chosen adequate? (more information can be found here)	**5**

Table 3: Criterion „Suitability of project participants"

2. Suitability of project participants (threshold = 12 points)	max. points 20
2.1 Does the consortium of the exploratory project have the necessary subject-specific and management **skills and qualifications** and the skills required to achieve the sustainability goals?	**8**
2.2 Does the project plan provide sufficient and appropriate **resources** for the planned implementation of the exploratory project?	**8**
2.3 Does the composition of the project team reflect the aim to improve the gender **balance** in the sector?	**4**

Table 4: Criterion „Benefit and exploitation"

3. Benefit and exploitation (threshold = 18 points)	max. points 30
3.1 Which **impact** do the planned results of the exploratory project have on decision making with respect to the idea or further RDI projects (strenghts/weaknesses, risk management, planned resources...)?	**10**
3.2 What are the **effects** (positive or negative) of the **idea or the approach of the potential further RDI project** in terms of sustainability (social, ecological, economic) and more specifically in terms of climate neutrality? What is the potential added value for the target group (private or public end users, customers, adopters)?	**10**
3.3 How concrete, transparent and complete are the **exploitation strategy** and the exploitation potential **by project participants and/or potential additional partners**?	**10**

Table 5: Criterion „Relevance to the Call“

4. Relevance to the Call (threshold = 12 points)	**max. points 20**
4.1 How relevant/important is the **idea or the approach of the potential further RDI project** in terms of achieving the **call objectives**? Do they sufficiently and adequately address the **call topic**?	**15**
4.2 What is the **incentive effect** of the funding? To what extent will the funding help to implement the project at all and/or within a shorter timeframe, and/or with higher ambition, and/or in a larger scope?	**5**

2.10 Which content and what documents are required for submission?

Project applications may only be submitted electronically via eCall.

The submission of exploratory projects includes the following elements:

- **Content Description** presents the project content.
- **Consortium** describes the expertise of the individual project partners.
- **Work Plan** describes the work packages, the associated costs and elements of project management such as the time management plan (GANTT diagram), duties, milestones, results.
- **Cost and Financing** describes all cost categories for each organisation involved. The sums for each individual work package are automatically displayed in the work plan.

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

Please find detailed information regarding the project submission, or further information if any additional documents or attachments are required in the call announcement.

If the project involves participants 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 further projects related to the current application. In doing so, the results of those projects and the generated know-how have to be described. These projects are relevant:

- 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 participants have submitted their partner applications via eCall.

How does it work?

- Enter the full project description consisting of content description, consortium, work plan, cost and financing via eCall.
- The system will verify whether the costs entered meet the funding conditions (e.g. funding amount, maximum project size)
- Upload the required documents (if necessary)
- Finalise the application in eCall and click "Submit application"
- Upon successful submission, an acknowledgement will be sent automatically by email

Not necessary:

- Additional postal submission of duly executed copy

Not possible:

- Revision of the application after submission

In the case of a cooperative Exploratory Project, 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.

3.3 How are disclosure requirements and freedom of information regulated?

The FFG is subject to Austria's Freedom of Information Act (IFG). The FFG publishes information of general interest which is not subject to confidentiality restrictions, for example in the project database. Furthermore, the FFG must respond to requests for information and, where appropriate, publish information in accordance with the statutory requirements. In answering requests for information, the FFG naturally takes every care to protect sensitive information. In accordance with Sec. 6 IFG, information which includes trade secrets, copyrighted content, or personal data is subject to special protective measures which is taken into account in every case. If necessary, the FFG will consult with those affected by the publication of such information.

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 call announcement.

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. They may request additional documents that are required for completing the financial check. Undertakings in difficulty cannot receive funding. Evaluation if an enterprise has to be classified as undertaking „in difficulty“ takes place in accordance with the European legal basis of this funding, the General Block Exemption Regulation (OJ L 187/19 in its current version, Art. 2 subpar. 18).

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 5.2.

4.3 Who takes the funding decision?

Information as to who takes the funding decision can be found in the respective call guideline.

5 FUNDING PROCEDURE

5.1 How is the Funding Contract concluded?

In case of a positive funding decision, the FFG will provide the beneficiary / consortium with a view in the eCall system with the most important basic paramenters 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 view within the given deadline, the FFG prepares the funding contract and delivers it to the beneficiary / consortium. The beneficiary / consortium returns the duly 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 instalment will be paid once the requirements have been met and the Funding Contract has been signed, however, not earlier than one week before the start of the funding period. 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 report and interim accounts have been approved or once the final report and final accounts have been approved
- (where necessary) once additional requirements have been met
- according to the FFG instalment scheme

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	0 to 18 months project duration	19 to 24 months project duration
Number of reports (final report)	1	2
1st instalment in % of funding amount at contract conclusion	50 %	50 %
2nd instalment in % of funding amount at contract conclusion	None	40 %
Final instalment up to % of funding amount	50 %	10 %

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 funding with regard to 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. 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 participants

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 content-related 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

Figure 1: Milestones of a call