Personal insights and reflections about ERC Starting Grant application

Matteo Campioli
2016 ERC StG Grantee
Presentation overview

• short about me – reasons my application
• ERC types of projects
• Tips & tricks written application
• Tips & tricks interview
Background
Background

• University of Antwerp – Department Biology
Background

• University of Antwerp – Department Biology
  – ecology, plant growth – ecosystem, biomass production, greenhouse effect, forestry – agriculture
Background

- University of Antwerp – Department Biology
  - ecology, plant growth – ecosystem, biomass production, greenhouse effect, forestry – agriculture

- FWO post-doc: 2012-2018 (15 y Belgium)
Background

• University of Antwerp – Department Biology
  – ecology, plant growth – ecosystem, biomass production, greenhouse effect, forestry – agriculture

• FWO post-doc: 2012-2018 (15 y Belgium)

• 02 Sep 2015: ERC info session
  15 Jun 2016: ERC interview
  01 Feb 2017: start project
Why I applied?

• permanent position – own group (on my interest)

• really challenging research question

• 1.5 euro: nice start …

• CV much stronger (further funding etc.)

• credibility & reputation (opening doors …)
Why I applied?

• permanent position – own group (on my interest)
Why I applied?

• permanent position – own group (on my interest)

‘Extras’

• really challenging research question
• 1.5 euro: nice start ...
• CV much stronger (further funding etc.)
• credibility & reputation (opening doors ...)
My application context

• Realized relevance ERC: 3–4 y after PhD
– Improve CV (2–3 extra y)
– only 1 chance to apply (2016)

• I did not have a ‘dream’ project
– many interests
– looked for most suitable project for ERC call
My application context

• Realized relevance ERC: 3-4 y after PhD
  – Improve CV (2-3 extra y)
  – only 1 chance to apply (2016)
My application context

• Realized relevance ERC: 3-4 y after PhD
  – Improve CV (2-3 extra y)
  – only 1 chance to apply (2016)

• I did not have a ‘dream’ project – many interests
  – looked for most suitable project for ERC call
My application context

• Realized relevance ERC: 3-4 y after PhD
  – Improve CV (2-3 extra y)
  – only 1 chance to apply (2016)

• I did not have a ‘dream’ project
  – looked for most suitable project for ERC call

Evaluation ERC
50% CV – 50% project
(it is said …)
My application context

• Realized relevance ERC: 3-4 y after PhD
  – Improve CV (2-3 extra y)
  – only 1 chance to apply (2016)

• I did not have a ‘dream project’
  – looked for most suitable project for ERC call

Are there project types with higher chances of success than others? (big project is not enough …) What about high risk – high gain? Paradigm shift? Etc.
TYPE OF ERC PROJECTS BASED ON MY EXPERIENCE
TYPE OF ERC PROJECTS BASED ON MY EXPERIENCE

• Global biomass production, climatic risks and societal impacts
Global biomass production, climatic risks and societal impacts

- better smaller (focused) project based your experience than too big (broad) project with catchy title – realistic
TYPE OF ERC PROJECTS BASED ON MY EXPERIENCE

- Global biomass production, climatic risks and societal impacts
- Plant growth efficiency and ecosystem management

- better smaller (focused) project based your experience than too big (broad) project with catchy title – realistic
**TYPE OF ERC PROJECTS BASED ON MY EXPERIENCE**

- Global biomass production, climatic risks and societal impacts
- Plant growth efficiency and ecosystem management

- *better smaller (focused) project based your experience than too big (broad) project with catchy title – realistic*
- *Answering a complete question (not only ‘what’ but also ‘why’)***
TYPE OF ERC PROJECTS BASED ON MY EXPERIENCE

- Global biomass production, climatic risks and societal impacts
- Plant growth efficiency and ecosystem management

- Better smaller (focused) project based your experience than too big (broad) project with catchy title – realistic
- Answering a complete question (not only ‘what’ but also ‘why’)
- Multiple approaches: experiments, data-analysis, modelling .... different lines
TYPE OF ERC PROJECTS BASED ON MY EXPERIENCE

- Global biomass production, climatic risks and societal impacts
- Plant growth efficiency and ecosystem management

- better smaller (focused) project based your experience than too big (broad) project with catchy title – realistic
- Answering a complete question (not only ‘what’ but also ‘why’)
- Multiple approaches: experiments, data-analysis, modelling …. different lines
- New methods are good project
TYPE OF ERC PROJECTS BASED ON MY EXPERIENCE

- Global biomass production, climatic risks and societal impacts
- Plant growth efficiency and ecosystem management
- Novel assessment of biomass production (with satellites)

- better smaller (focused) project based your experience than too big (broad) project with catchy title – realistic
- Answering a complete question (not only ‘what’ but also ‘why’)
- Multiple approaches: experiments, data-analysis, modelling .... different lines
- New methods are good project
TYPE OF ERC PROJECTS BASED ON MY EXPERIENCE

- Global biomass production, climatic risks and societal impacts
- Plant growth efficiency and ecosystem management
- Novel assessment of biomass production (with satellites)

- Better smaller (focused) project based your experience than too big (broad) project with catchy title – realistic
- Answering a complete question (not only ‘what’ but also ‘why’)
- Multiple approaches: experiments, data-analysis, modelling …. different lines
- New methods are good project
- Something significant, that will last, not that will be improved in 5 y
- better smaller (focused) project based your experience than too big (broad) project with catchy title – realistic
- Answering a complete question (not only ‘what’ but also ‘why’)
- Multiple approaches: experiments, data-analysis, modelling .... different lines
- New methods are good project
- Something significant, that will last, not that will be improved in 5 y
TYPE OF ERC PROJECTS BASED ON MY EXPERIENCE

• Global biomass production, climatic risks and societal impacts
• Plant growth efficiency and ecosystem management
• Novel assessment of biomass production (with satellites)
• Novel assessment of biomass production (from gas emission)

- better smaller (focused) project based your experience than too big (broad) project with catchy title – realistic
- Answering a complete question (not only ‘what’ but also ‘why’)
- Multiple approaches: experiments, data-analysis, modelling …. different lines
- New methods are good project
- Something significant, that will last, not that will be improved in 5 y
- Risk not too early (in WP1) – risk not obvious (instrument failure...)
TYPE OF ERC PROJECTS BASED ON MY EXPERIENCE

- Global biomass production, climatic risks and societal impacts
- Plant growth efficiency and ecosystem management
- Novel assessment of biomass production (with satellites)
- Novel assessment of biomass production (from gas emission)

- better smaller (focused) project based your experience than too big (broad) project with catchy title – realistic
- Answering a complete question (not only ‘what’ but also ‘why’)
- Multiple approaches: experiments, data-analysis, modelling …. different lines
- New methods are good project
- Something significant, that will last, not that will be improved in 5 y
- Risk not too early (in WP1) – risk not obvious (instrument failure...)
TYPE OF ERC PROJECTS BASED ON MY EXPERIENCE

- Global biomass production, climatic risks and societal impacts
- Plant growth efficiency and ecosystem management
- Novel assessment of biomass production (with satellites)
- Novel assessment of biomass production (from gas emission)

- better smaller (focused) project based your experience than too big (broad) project with catchy title – realistic
- Answering a complete question (not only ‘what’ but also ‘why’)
- Multiple approaches: experiments, data-analysis, modelling …. different lines
- New methods are good project
- Something significant, that will last, not that will be improved in 5 y
- Risk not too early (in WP1) – risk not obvious (instrument failure...)
TYPE OF ERC PROJECTS BASED ON MY EXPERIENCE

- Global biomass production, climatic risks and societal impacts
- Plant growth efficiency and ecosystem management
- Novel assessment of biomass production (with satellites)
- Novel assessment of biomass production (from gas emission)
- What makes leaves fall in autumn? A new process description for the timing of leaf senescence in temperate and boreal trees

- *better smaller (focused) project based your experience than too big (broad) project with catchy title*
  – realistic
- Answering a complete question (not only ‘what’ but also ‘why’)
- Multiple approaches: experiments, data-analysis, modelling …. different lines
- New methods are good project
- Something significant, that will last, not that will be improved in 5 y
- Risk not too early (in WP1) – risk not obvious (instrument failure...)
TYPE OF ERC PROJECTS BASED ON MY EXPERIENCE

- Global biomass production, climatic risks and societal impacts
- Plant growth efficiency and ecosystem management
- Novel assessment of biomass production (with satellites)
- Novel assessment of biomass production (from gas emission)
- What makes leaves fall in autumn? A new process description for the timing of leaf senescence in temperate and boreal trees

- **better smaller (focused) project based your experience than too big (broad) project with catchy title** – realistic
- Answering a complete question (not only ‘what’ but also ‘why’)
- Multiple approaches: experiments, data-analysis, modelling …. different lines
- New methods are good project
- Something significant, that will last, not that will be improved in 5 y
- Risk not too early (in WP1) – risk not obvious (instrument failure...)

- Something clear (that many panel members can understand... )
Global biomass production, climatic risks and societal impacts
Plant growth efficiency and ecosystem management
Novel assessment of biomass production (with satellites)
Novel assessment of biomass production (from gas emission)
What makes leaves fall in autumn? A new process description for the timing of leaf senescence in temperate and boreal trees

- better smaller (focused) project based your experience than too big (broad) project with catchy title – realistic
- Answering a complete question (not only ‘what’ but also ‘why’)
- Multiple approaches: experiments, data-analysis, modelling .... different lines
- New methods are good project
- Something significant, that will last, not that will be improved in 5 y
- Risk not too early (in WP1) – risk not obvious (instrument failure...)

- Something clear (that many panel members can understand... )
- Something people tried but not succeeded (you have a new hypothesis/approach/method...)
TYPE OF ERC PROJECTS BASED ON MY EXPERIENCE

- Global biomass production, climatic risks and societal impacts
- Plant growth efficiency and ecosystem management
- Novel assessment of biomass production (with satellites)
- Novel assessment of biomass production (from gas emission)
- What makes leaves fall in autumn? A new process description for the timing of leaf senescence in temperate and boreal trees

- better smaller (focused) project based your experience than too big (broad) project with catchy title – realistic
- Answering a complete question (not only ‘what’ but also ‘why’)
- Multiple approaches: experiments, data-analysis, modelling .... different lines
- New methods are good project
- Something significant, that will last, not that will be improved in 5 y
- Risk not too early (in WP1) – risk not obvious (instrument failure...)

- Something clear (that many panel members can understand... )
- Something people tried but not succeeded (you have a new hypothesis/approach/method...)
- Something that changes the way of thinking (paradigm shift...) - something that correct past errors community
TYPE OF ERC PROJECTS BASED ON MY EXPERIENCE

- Global biomass production, climatic risks and societal impacts
- Plant growth efficiency and ecosystem management
- Novel assessment of biomass production (with satellites)
- Novel assessment of biomass production (from gas emission)
- What makes leaves fall in autumn? A new process description for the timing of leaf senescence in temperate and boreal trees

- better smaller (focused) project based your experience than too big (broad) project with catchy title – realistic
- Answering a complete question (not only ‘what’ but also ‘why’)
- Multiple approaches: experiments, data-analysis, modelling .... different lines
- New methods are good project
- Something significant, that will last, not that will be improved in 5 y
- Risk not too early (in WP1) – risk not obvious (instrument failure...)

- Something clear (that many panel members can understand... )
- Something people tried but not succeeded (you have a new hypothesis/approach/method...)
- Something that changes the way of thinking (paradigm shift...) - something that correct past errors community
- Something no incremental - one major step better then several small steps
TYPE OF ERC PROJECTS BASED ON MY EXPERIENCE

- Global biomass production, climatic risks and societal impacts
- Plant growth efficiency and ecosystem management
- Novel assessment of biomass production (with satellites)
- Novel assessment of biomass production (from gas emission)
- What makes leaves fall in autumn? A new process description for the timing of leaf senescence in temperate and boreal trees

- better smaller (focused) project based your experience than too big (broad) project with catchy title – realistic
- Answering a complete question (not only ‘what’ but also ‘why’)
- Multiple approaches: experiments, data-analysis, modelling .... different lines
- New methods are good project
- Something significant, that will last, not that will be improved in 5 y
- Risk not too early (in WP1) – risk not obvious (instrument failure...)
- Something clear (that many panel members can understand... )
- Something people tried but not succeeded (you have a new hypothesis/approach/method...)
- Something that changes the way of thinking (paradigm shift...) - something that correct past errors community
- Something no incremental - one major step better then several small steps

my major focus last 4 y work
interest since 12 y
Tip & tricks application

- Project
  - First B2 then B1
  - Be clear & help readers (figure/schemes etc.)
  - Proof editing
  - Risk mitigation paragraph
- Back-up plans, alternatives hypothesis/methods, advisory board
- CV
  - Keep (more or less) the format … but you can make small changes
  - 11 small sections: 2 skipped, 1 added 'Research interests and perspectives'
  - Extra info (explanation on e.g. key publications, your project background)
  - Details (e.g. how much was a post-doc grant you won?)
- General
  - Discuss it with senior colleagues, ERC grantees or former ERC panel members
  - Ask examples of winning proposal (through research managers your university)
  - Proposal: lot of work … but you can do at easy and with advices: do it carefully as a strong written file will be very helpful in second step!
Tip & tricks application

• Project
  – First B2 then B1
  – Be clear & help readers (figure/schemes etc.) – proof editing (?)
  – Risk mitigation paragraph
    • back-up plans, alternatives hypothesis/methods, advisory board

• CV
  – Keep (more or less) the format … but you can make small changes

• 11 small sections: 2 skipped, 1 added ‘Research interests and perspectives’
  – Extra info (explanation on e.g. key publications, your project background)
  – Details (e.g. how much was a post-doc grant you won?)

• General
  – Discuss it with senior colleagues, ERC grantees or former ERC panel members
  – Ask examples of winning proposal (through research managers your university)
  – Proposal: lot of work … but you can do it easily and with advices: do it carefully as a strong written file will be very helpful in second step!
Tip & tricks application

- Project
  - First B2 then B1
  - Be clear & help readers (figure/schemes etc.) – proof editing (?)
  - Risk mitigation paragraph
    - back-up plans, alternatives hypothesis/methods, advisory board

- CV
  - Keep (more or less) the format ... but you can make small changes
    - 11 small sections: 2 skipped, 1 added ‘Research interests and prospectives’
  - Extra info (explanation on e.g. key publications, your project background)
  - Details (e.g. how much was a post-doc grant you won?)
Tip & tricks application

• Project
  – First B2 then B1
  – Be clear & help readers (figure/schemes etc.) – proof editing (?)
  – Risk mitigation paragraph
    • back-up plans, alternatives hypothesis/methods, advisory board

• CV
  – Keep (more or less) the format ... but you can make small changes
    • 11 small sections: 2 skipped, 1 added ‘Research interests and prospectives’
  – Extra info (explanation on e.g. key publications, your project background)
  – Details (e.g. how much was a post-doc grant you won?)

• General
  – Discuss it with senior colleagues, ERC grantees or former ERC panel members
  – Ask examples of winning proposal (through research managers your university)
  – Proposal: lot of work ... but you can do at easy and with advices: do it carefully as a strong written file will be very helpful in second step!
Tip & tricks interview

Difficult! (stress, emotions, difficult questions and 'difficult' panel members, surprising/unexpected comments from reviewers etc.):

PREPARE IT WELL!

• Before ….
  – Prepare super-good your 10 minute presentation
  • make several mock defenses (I had 6-7… colleagues, international partners, research managers, consultants);
  • repeat tens and tens of times … in 'real conditions' (with laser pointer, stand up etc.)

• Ask colleagues and peers to read your proposal and make questions
  • I had ca. 25 colleagues /managers …>200 questions …. study the questions (in interview I had similar questions I had already been asked!)

• Take a look to recent publications: something appeared in your domain?

• That day – Answer the questions to the point & be brief and calm
  • I had 10 questions in 15 minutes … I guess panel likes to have time to pose questions they thought…
  – What to do if you do not know an answer? Prepare this situation ….
Tip & tricks interview

• Difficult! (stress, emotions, difficult questions and ‘difficult’ panel members, surprising/unexpected comments from reviewers etc.): PREPARE IT WELL!
Tip & tricks interview

• Difficult! (stress, emotions, difficult questions and ‘difficult’ panel members, surprising/unexpected comments from reviewers etc.): PREPARE IT WELL!

• Before ....
  – Prepare super-good your 10 minute presentation
    • make several mock defenses (I had 6-7... colleagues, international partners, research managers, consultants );
    • repeat tens and tens of times ... in ‘real conditions’ (with laser-pointer, stand-up etc.)
  – Ask colleagues and peers to read your proposal and make questions
    • I had ca. 25 colleagues /managers ...>200 questions .... study the questions (in interview I had similar questions I had already been asked!)
    • Take a look to recent publications: something appeared in your domain?
Tip & tricks interview

• Difficult! (stress, emotions, difficult questions and ‘difficult’ panel members, surprising/unexpected comments from reviewers etc.): PREPARE IT WELL!

• Before ....
  – Prepare super-good your 10 minute presentation
    • make several mock defenses (I had 6-7... colleagues, international partners, research managers, consultants);
    • repeat tens and tens of times ... in ‘real conditions’ (with laser-pointer, stand-up etc.)
  – Ask colleagues and peers to read your proposal and make questions
    • I had ca. 25 colleagues /managers ...>200 questions .... study the questions (in interview I had similar questions I had already been asked!)
    • Take a look to recent publications: something appeared in your domain?

• That day
  – Answer the questions to the point & be brief and calm
    • I had 10 questions in 15 minutes ... I guess panel likes to have time to pose questions they thought...
  – What to do if you do not know an answer? Prepare this situation ....
Tip & tricks interview

• Difficult! (stress, emotions, difficult questions and ‘difficult’ panel members, surprising/unexpected comments from reviewers etc.): PREPARE IT WELL!

• Before ....
  – Prepare super-good your 10 minute presentation
    • make several mock defenses (I had 6-7... colleagues, international partners, research managers, consultants);
    • repeat tens and tens of times ... in ‘real conditions’ (with laser-pointer, stand-up etc.)
  – Ask colleagues and peers to read your proposal and make questions
    • I had ca. 25 colleagues /managers ...>200 questions .... study the questions (in interview I had similar questions I had already been asked!)
    • Take a look to recent publications: something appeared in your domain?

• That day
  – Answer the questions to the point & be brief and calm
    • I had 10 questions in 15 minutes ... I guess panel likes to have time to pose questions they thought...
  – What to do if you do not know an answer? Prepare this situation ...... based on my own experience (and peers who have advised me ...) - different approaches to application are possible!
Conclusions

• Do you need to be lucky? Yes
Conclusions

• Do you need to be lucky? Yes
• But try to help the ‘luck’ coming to you by
  – be conscious what ERC call is for (type of project)
  – prepare both steps (text and interview) really good