

Comparison ERC Starting Grant – SNSF Eccellenza Professorship Fellowships

Version of 12 November 2021

Disclaimer

The differences and similarities highlighted in this document have been elaborated by the ERC NCPs and are neither conclusive nor fully objective. They are meant primarily as guidance for researchers who consider transforming a proposal initially designed to apply for SNSF funding into an ERC application.

The information on the Eccellenza scheme is based mainly on the Regulations and Guidelines applicable to the 2021 call, to be found on the [SNSFs website on Eccellenza](#).

Summary of Highlighted Differences

- Eccellenza is a career funding grant, while the ERC Starting Grant is a project funding scheme. This has implications for certain parts of the proposal and with the evaluation criteria.
- The match of the research environment of the Host Institution to the PIs research discipline and project is an important criteria for Eccellenza, but less so for the ERC.
- In general, more risky projects (if risk is matched by a potentially high gain) are accepted by the ERC than by SNSF.
- The evaluation panels are narrower in scientific scope with the ERC and there might in principle be less weight on the opinion of single evaluators than with Eccellenza.

Characteristics of Eccellenza

Aim

Eccellenza professorship fellowships are targeted at highly qualified researchers who aspire to a permanent professorship. The scheme funds projects carried out by researchers who will then be given the position of assistant professor, i.e. Eccellenza fellows must be employed by the Host Institution at the level of assistant professor and cannot have held a position as assistant professor or higher in Switzerland (or in a country with a similar academic system) before. The scheme is part of the SNSF's portfolio of career funding instruments.

Difference to ERC StG

The ERC StG is primarily a project funding scheme. The career path of the researcher and the potential of the project to have a major positive impact on the academic career of the person are far more important aspects with Eccellenza than with ERC StG.

In ERC StG the current or past type of employment is not directly relevant: researchers who are already assistant professors or hold a permanent position at a university are eligible to apply as are those without such a position. The PIs salary may be included in an ERC budget if not covered already by the institution.

Eligibility and Resubmission Rule

Researchers are eligible for Eccellenza if their PhD defence was between 3 and 8 years before the call deadline.

A researcher can re-submit to the Eccellenza scheme only once. Resubmissions have to include a detailed response to the criticism in the evaluation of the initial application.

Difference to ERC StG

- With an eligibility time window of 2-7 years after the PhD, the ERC StG is similar to Eccellenza.
- With the ERC, the 1st January of the call year (which for StG is usually a date after the call deadline) is the reference date for calculating eligibility.
- With ERC StG there is no limit on the amount of times a proposal can be resubmitted. However, researchers whose proposals are rejected at the 1st evaluation step need to skip 1-2 calls until they can resubmit. With the ERC, applicants must only indicate the fact that a similar proposal has been submitted before for statistical reasons and to assess eligibility but a previous submission has no impact on the evaluation.

Project Duration and Funding

Eccellenza project duration is 5 years. Funds cover the PIs salary as well as up to CHF 1 mio for project costs. Project costs may include personnel costs of employees who will work on the project. Researchers are normally expected to work 100%. Researchers with care duties can lower this percentage but all grantees must work at least 80%. Exceptions apply for clinical researchers and those at universities of applied science or teacher education.

Difference to ERC StG

SNSF pays for the full salary of the researchers, even though researchers are allowed to teach or carry out administrative obligations to a certain level (usually for not more than 20% of their working time) on the side of the project. This reflects the career rather than project funding nature of Eccellenza. With the ERC StG, researchers determine the appropriate and realistic time commitment on their ERC projects which needs to be at least 50% of their working time. If they request their salary from the ERC, they can only do so for the percentage working time they spend on the project.

Proposal

The Eccellenza project description is divided into two parts, similar to an ERC StG proposal:

- An “Extended Synopsis” of 5 pages maximum.
- A “Research Plan” of 20 pages maximum (including a 1-page summary).

Additionally, the application includes the following

- CV of max. 3 pages
- Description of scientific achievements (impact of previous research on the field) of max. 1 page
- Career plan of max. 1 page
- List of research outputs. The categories listed must be kept and “none” indicated if a heading is not relevant
- Statement of mobility (prospectively and retrospectively)
- Academic age form, where the applicant takes into account any career gaps (whether relevant for extension of the eligibility time window or not) to determine his/her academic age.

Differences to ERC StG

- With SNSF, the documents regarding the PI's career need to very strictly follow the template and instructions. With the ERC, the subheadings of the CV e.g. are simply recommendations, but don't need to be included if not considered appropriate.

- The “research plan” of an Eccellenza application contains a separate section on “current state of personal research” that needs to be specified separately from the description of the state of the art in the field. With an ERC proposal, there isn’t necessarily such a distinction between state of the art developed by the PI versus other groups.
- The space available to describe the excellence of the PI differs between Eccellenza und ERC StG. For the latter, the CV and track-record sections are restricted to 2 pages each.
- A career plan and statement of mobility are not part of an ERC StG application. That these are part of an Eccellenza application highlight the fact that an Eccellenza fellowship is primarily a career rather than a project funding scheme.
- The net academic age needs to be calculated with an Eccellenza application. With the ERC, any career gaps should be described in a dedicated section of the CV, but there is no actual quantitative calculation of the net academic age.
- With Eccellenza, a Data Management Plan (DMP) must be submitted with the application, whereas with the ERC such a plan must be submitted any time within the first six months of project implementation.

Evaluation

Description of the SNSF Eccellenza Evaluation Procedure

For an overview of the evaluation procedure see the chart on the SNSF website: <https://www.snf.ch/en/MnwA9gE4ykW1cWzT/page/evaluation-procedures/careers>.

For each proposal, a member of the evaluation commission assumes the role of referee and another member the role of co-referee. These two persons actually assess the proposal, taking into account any external reviews. They rate the application for the attention of the relevant evaluation commission who then votes on marks. Experts that the applicant wishes to exclude from the evaluation can be named, as with the ERC.

Typically the **first evaluation step** is performed by the evaluation commission only. During a meeting of the evaluation commission, the referee presents the applications (as presented in the Synopsis and documents on the PI) assigned to them and give and defend their recommendation. The co-referee also defends their opinion. The application is then discussed in relation to the other applications. Finally, each application is voted on based on six categories from “outstanding” to “poor”.

Proposals passing to the **second evaluation step** are sent to at least two external experts for reviews and the candidates invited for interviews with the evaluation commission. These external reviewers ideally are from outside Switzerland. The remaining procedure is according to that of step 1.

Differences in evaluation procedure

Terminology: The SNSF uses the terms “1st stage/2nd stage”. In the context of the EU framework programs, the term “stage” is used for calls where applicants submit new documents once invited to stage 2 (e.g. in two-stage calls for collaborative projects). For schemes in which all documents are submitted at once, but not all of them assessed at once (e.g. ERC research grant calls), the term “evaluation step” is used.

Access to documents: In the second evaluation step of Eccellenza, evaluators do not have access to the Extended Synopsis whereas they do with ERC StG.

Access to evaluation reports: With SNSF, applicants obtain only a summary of the referee’s reasons for giving the application a specific overall rating if rejected at the first evaluation step. Only applicants who pass to the 2nd evaluation step have access to detailed evaluation reports.

Evaluation bodies and funding decisions: Eccellenza applications are evaluated by three dedicated evaluation committees (one per research domain), comprising 25-30 members each. The names of the roughly 25 members of each committee are listed on the SNSF website.

With ERC Starting grant, the evaluation body or panel (6-11 per domain) much more specialized than the Eccellenza evaluation committees.

With the ERC, two to three panel members do assess the proposal and external reviews. However, they do not to our knowledge formulate recommendations towards the panel for the rejection or funding or passing to the 2nd evaluation step as the referee and co-referee in an SNSF application do. Individual members in the SNSFs evaluation commissions do seem to have in general more influence on the fate of an application than with the ERC. Also ERC panels attempts to avoid simple whereas with the SNSF this seems the standard procedure to decide about a proposal's fates.

Evaluation Criteria

The detailed evaluation criteria for Eccellenza are listed in Article 12 of the [Regulations](#) (version applicable to 2021 call).

Main differences to ERC StG

- The choice of host institution – specifically its suitability and added value in supporting the research project scientifically - is an evaluation criterion with Eccellenza, but not with ERC StG.
- The applicant's career development as well as mobility (retrospective and prospective) and in particular mobility by the end of the project is assessed with Eccellenza and does according to official documents not play a role in ERC StG evaluation.
- The scientific independence of the applicant at the host institution is assessed with Eccellenza whereas it is taken for granted with ERC StG.
- The scientific relevance, originality, and topicality as well as approach, methodology, and feasibility of the research project is assessed with Eccellenza, but not its high-risk, high-gain nature. The SNSF apparently carefully assesses whether the tasks assigned to PhD students are adequate to deliver a strong theses. Typically such subprojects thus are not too risky and in general, there is no notion that the project is expected to be of high-risk high-gain nature. On the contrary, the aspect of high-risk, high-gain is very important in ERC StG evaluations.

With SNSF, for proposals for “use-inspired basic research”, the expected impact of the project beyond science is considered additionally. Also specific evaluation criteria apply to applicants who submit proposals to work at universities of applied sciences or universities of teacher education as host institutions.

Possible Overlap Eccellenza – ERC StG

The SNSF Eccellenza Professorial Fellowships Guidelines stipulate that a researcher can hold both an Eccellenza fellowship and an ERC Starting Grant. In case of scientific overlap between the projects they might only obtain salary funding from SNSF. The detailed arrangements are subject to negotiation.

Acknowledgements

Judith Zbinden would like to thank Michael Sollberger (university of Bern) and Matthias Held (university of Fribourg) for fruitful discussions and concrete feedback to preliminary versions of the document. While these two network members have significantly contributed to the document, they are not responsible in any way for the information presented.