  



**ERC Support Scheme 2024**

**Rules for Participation – State Aid**

**1.0 Introduction**

The Xjenza Malta is receiving proposals under the ERC Support Scheme (“The Scheme”). The Scheme aims to strengthen the opportunities for talented researchers to obtain grants from the [ERC (European Research Council)](https://erc.europa.eu/homepage) for excellent and ground-breaking research based on researchers’ own ideas within all areas of research. The Scheme is divided into two options. Applicants are to fill in the appropriate sections of the form; they may select either Option A or Option B, or both:

1. **Option A:** Mentoring initiative

The mentoring initiative will support potential ERC applicants by helping to identify international experts to provide coaching and advice.

Applicants interested to benefit from the [ERC Mentoring Initiative](https://erc.europa.eu/news/new-mentoring-scheme) are to indicate their interest and detail the mentoring activities they require. An expected workload and envisaged compensations for the mentors are to be specified. Following the external evaluation and upon approval of the application, XJENZA MALTA (the Council) will notify ERCEA with the mentoring activities required. ERCEA identifies grantees and former panel members interested in being mentors. ERCEA will then provide a list of such Mentors to the Council. The applicant will select the relevant mentor from the provided list. In exceptional cases, when no suitable mentor is available from the list, the applicant may select another ERC grantee.

The maximum cost for Option A should be up to €5000 (inclusive of VAT). The Mentor should quote their hourly rate and be paid for the total number of hours provided to the mentee.

This Scheme is developed fully in line and supports the requirements listed in the [ERC Guidelines.](https://erc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document/file/Guidelines_ERC_Mentoring_Initiative.pdf)

The ERC support will consist of identifying ERC grantees and former panel members who could serve as external mentors to help national programmes. Such support will help the selected candidates to strengthen the quality of their application.

The ERC underlines that the decision for mentors to accept or otherwise the offer from the applicants, is entirely with the mentors. ERC will not intervene in assignment of a specific mentor to a specific mentee. The mentors will be contacted by the Council as XJENZA MALTA is the official contact entity for ERC and the Horizon Europe programme.

1. **Option B:** Proposal writing trainings.

The objective of this activity is to raise the capabilities of potential ERC candidates to prepare successful ERC grant applications through attending ERC proposal writing trainings.

The training activities may take place in any EU Member State or Associated Country physically or online. The trainers must have extensive experience and proven track record in running ERC workshops and helping successful ERC grantees. The duration of the physical trainings should be of minimum 1 day and maximum 5 days. No restrictions apply for the online trainings.

The scheme is not to be used for organisation of trainings and workshops in Malta.

The maximum cost for Option B should be €2000.

Applicants that have benefitted from Option A, Option B or both and have been invited to the interview stage, may request a top up of €3000 to be used for the interview preparation and pay a company that offers interview preparation training or pay a mentor from the ERC Initiative mentors list. In order to benefit from this top up, the applicant is to contact XJENZA MALTA (through the email address indicated in section 11) as soon as he or she has been invited for the interview.

1. **Definitions**
* **Applicant** means anyone eligible to apply in terms of these Rules for Participation and who consequently applies for funding under this scheme.
* **Arm’s length** means that the conditions of the transaction between the contracting parties do not differ from those which would be stipulated between independent enterprises and contain no element of collusion. Any transaction that results from an open, transparent and non-discriminatory procedure is considered as meeting the arm’s length principle. Having family ties or a personal relationship between the service provider and the applicant will lead to a breach of the arm length principle.
* **Candidate** shall have the meaning of the ERC Principal Investigator who will apply for the ERC Grant.
* **Council** refers to the Xjenza Malta.
* **ERC Grants:** any of the following - Starting Grant, Consolidator Grant, Advanced Grant, Synergy Grant and Proof of Concept. More information is available [here.](https://erc.europa.eu/)
* **Eligible undertakings** are all those entities that carry an economic activity under the Article 107 of TFEU and are eligible to apply for the ERC call as host institutions.
* **Host Institution** may be any legal entity established in Malta (public or private), which has the infrastructure and capacity to carry out frontier research projects. In ERC grants, the Host Institution is the only participating entity (single beneficiary) and it engages and hosts the Principal Investigator and the research team for at least the duration of the grant, under the condition that a formal commitment is made by the Host Institution to provide the Principal Investigator with the appropriate scientific and administrative environment to conduct the research.
* **Letter of intent** is a document outlining the understanding between two or more parties which provides the basis for future legally binding agreements (in this case, an official letter of approval). Re-imbursement of funds is subject to satisfying the criteria listed in this national rules.
* **Principal Investigator** is the project leader of the ERC project. He/she can be of any age and nationality and can be based in any country at moment of submitting the application, as long as he/she intends to establish and conduct their research activity under the ERC Grant in Malta. Specific professional experience is requested for each ERC Grant and detailed in the ERC Annual Work Programme and on the [ERC website](https://erc.europa.eu/).
* **Single Undertaking** includes all enterprises having at least one of the following relationships with each other:

i. One enterprise has a majority of the shareholders’ or members’ voting rights in another enterprise;

ii. One enterprise has the right to appoint or remove a majority of the members of the administrative, management or supervisory body of another enterprise;

iii. One enterprise has the right to exercise a dominant influence on another enterprise pursuant to a contract entered into with that enterprise or to a provision in its memorandum or articles of association;

iv. One enterprise, which is a shareholder in or member of another enterprise, controls alone, pursuant to an agreement with other shareholders in or members of that enterprise, a majority of shareholders’ or members’ voting rights in that enterprise.

Enterprises having any of the relationships referred to in points (i) to (iv) above through one or more other enterprises shall be considered to be a single undertaking.

* **Undertaking** covers any entity engaged in an economic activity within the meaning of Article 107 TFEU, regardless of its legal status and the way in which it is financed.

**3.0 Eligibility Criteria**

Maltese entities that plan to act as Host Institutions are eligible to benefit from the Scheme. The applicant must be an eligible undertaking (as defined in Section 2.0 of these rules under the term eligible undertakings) that carries out an economic activity within the meaning of Article 107 TFEU.

Applicants who have other funded projects with the Council and are in default, and/or have gone beyond the timelines of the project, are not eligible to participate.

Any application submitted by or including the participation of any legal person or legal entity having, in totality or in majority ownership, the same shareholders, partners or persons holding and / or exercising a controlling power in any other legal entity which will have been at any time prior to such application declared as non-compliant or defaulting on any other contract or agreement entered into with the Council, shall be automatically declared as inadmissible.

Funding under this Scheme is made available on the basis that the Applicant has not benefited and will not benefit from any other grant or financial incentive of whatever nature, applied for and/or utilised for the same scope as that subject of the funding requested under this Scheme.

For a proposal to be eligible, the Candidate that intends to submit an ERC proposal with the Applicant legal entity as a Host Institution must:

• have a doctoral degree awarded and meets the eligibility requirements for the selected ERC type of grant;

• be employed by the Applicant legal entity/Host Institution or have established contact with the Applicant legal entity/Host entity which has agreed to host the candidate.

• not or have not been an ERC grantee;

• act as a Principal Investigator (PI) applying for the ERC grant.

• submit, within 12 months from the conclusion of the mentoring and/or training activity a proposal for an ERC grant (Starting, Consolidator, Advanced or Synergy) to finance research planned to be conducted in a Maltese Host Institution. Tentative dates for upcoming calls can be seen on the [ERC Website](https://erc.europa.eu/homepage). Proof of Concept (PoC) call is not eligible.

Applications should be endorsed by the entity’s legal representative. Applicants already featuring on XJENZA MALTA’s non-compliance list will not be eligible to apply for this Awards Scheme.

**4.0 Conflict of Interest**

Applications are to be fully in line with the ERC’s rules of conflicts of interest which can be found [here](https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/erc/webexp/files/erc_rules_on_conflict_of_interest.pdf).

For the avoidance of doubt, a conflict of interest (COI) shall exist if the trainer/mentor/Host Researcher

• is a director / trustee / partner of the Applicant or involved in the management of the Applicant entity or is an employee of the same entity, or is otherwise related (by consanguinity or affinity) to the Candidate.

A conflict of interest (COI) exists for Option B if the trainer;

• is involved in the preparation of the ERC proposal;

• Is the Host Entity in the ERC proposal to be submitted to the European Commission.

• stands to benefit directly if the proposal is positively evaluated. Providing market research information to the applicant will not be considered a COI.

• has a family / personal relationship with any person representing an applicant

• is a director / trustee / partner of the applicant or involved in the management of the applicant’s entity or is an employee of the same entity.

If it emerges that the chosen training service has a conflict of interest as explained in the previous clause, the beneficiary cannot use their services and must choose a different consultant.

**5.0 Financing**

The Applicant is invited to provide a breakdown of the anticipated costs to carry out the proposed activities as part of the XJENZA MALTA ‘ERC Support Scheme 2024 - Application Form’. XJENZA MALTA reserves the right to request the reduction of any amount quoted by the Applicant should this be considered as being over-estimated.

The amount of the award available under the Scheme (the **“Award”**) to any one successful Applicant is capped at €5000 for Option A and €2000 for Option B. A maximum €7000 can be requested per candidate (Exception is made when the candidate is invited to the interview stage and may request additional €3000). A detailed breakdown of the estimated costs is to be included in the application form.

The financing will be provided to the Host Institution based on reimbursement. 100% of the accepted eligible costs will be disbursed following submission of final report, including invoices, receipts; and proof of submission of the ERC proposal through the Funding and Tenders portal of the European Commission. Eligible expenses are only those procured after the project starts (after the letter of intent is signed) and invoices and receipts cannot be related to activities before the letter of intent has been signed.

Failure to submit the ERC proposal will result in receiving only 50% of the payment

**Eligible costs:**

**For Option A**:

* Mentoring costs such as fees (estimated by hourly rate and number of hours requested);
* flights for travel related to the mentoring initiative (the total amount for each flight should be estimated as costing no more than €500 for EU countries and €1000 for non-EU countries and should be an economy class ticket);
* travel insurance; airport transfers; subsistence allowance (inclusive of accommodation)

**For Option B:**

* online ERC trainings/workshop fees;
* fees for attending physical ERC trainings/workshops
* flights for travel related to the training (the total amount for each flight should be estimated as costing no more than €500 for EU countries and €1000 for non-EU countries and should be an economy class ticket);
* travel insurance; airport transfers; and subsistence allowance (inclusive of accommodation) - when subsistence costs are calculated the local entity’s pre-approved subsistence allowances should be used;

Expenses related to loans, interests and recoverable value added tax are considered as ineligible costs.

The Applicant must follow applicable procurement regulations and the Council can request evidence that the services were good value for money. eg. quotations, etc.

Award holders/ERC candidates will be responsible for arranging all relevant activities including, but not limited to, travel plans, accommodation, logistics planning, insurance coverage for any participant travel, etc. The Applicant should provide an estimated breakdown of the anticipated costs to carry out the project’s activities in the application form.

**No double funding** is permitted for the **same** activities carried out under the Scheme and in conjunction with other schemes.

**6.0 Submission of Application Form**

The Scheme will be open throughout the year with the following cut offs in between:

* 10th April 2024
* 28th June 2024
* 27th September 2024

Interested Applicants are to submit their application form electronically to horizon.malta@gov.mt with “ERC Support Scheme - Application 2024” as a subject heading**.** Applications that are receiving prior each cut off dates will be processed through administrative check and evaluation immediately after each cut off date.

The application must be dated and signed by the Candidate and the legal representative of the Applicant. Late or incomplete applications will not be considered.

Submissions should include the following documents:

* ‘ERC Support Scheme Application Form’ in such template format as published by XJENZA MALTA in connection with the Call.
* For Option B quotation for the training event/s

It is the responsibility of the Applicant to ensure the timely and correct delivery of the application form to XJENZA MALTA. It should be noted that emails larger than **10MB** will be automatically rejected by the mail system. The Applicant may make use of data transfer via cloud storage for the purpose of the application.

**7.0 Selection Process**

Eligible applications will be assessed by a selection panel set up by the Council against the following criteria:

* Research achievements of the Candidate;
* Excellence of the ERC proposed project idea (project’s brief) and relevance to the pre-identified call topic.
* For Option B: relevance of the proposed training/s.

Proposals are subject to an eligibility check and a peer review.

Priority will be given to well-defined proposals which demonstrates increased odds of success for securing third party-funding or which demonstrate a clear benefit to enhancing the international dimension of local research & innovation activity.

**8.0 Award Duration**

Upon successful completion of the evaluation stage, it may be necessary for XJENZA MALTA to negotiate the amount of the Award requested in the application form. XJENZA MALTA retains the right to provide Awards of a different sum should the amount in the ‘breakdown of costs’ appears to have been overestimated.

The deadline for completion of the projects/activities funded under the Award is 12 months from the signed letter of intent, although projects may be completed within a shorter period. Upon completion of the activities/projects (once the ERC proposal has been submitted), the Applicant is to submit a final report within 60 days according to a standard template provided by XJENZA MALTA. The final report will need to be accompanied by all relevant documentation, including receipts demonstrating how the Award was spent. XJENZA MALTA retains the right to audit the financial documentation and to request further proof of expenditure of the Award. Should there be a significant discrepancy between the sum of the Award disbursed by XJENZA MALTA and the amount spent by the applicant (as substantiated through receipts or other financial documentation) XJENZA MALTA retains the right to request a reimbursement of unspent funds.

Any requests for change of use of the Award should be addressed in writing to horizon.malta@gov.mt. Such request needs to receive consent from XJENZA MALTA prior to being effected. Requests for the extension of an Award needs to be sent by a formal letter from the Applicant at least 2 months before the deadline of the letter of intent. The Council will review the request and reply within 2 weeks from the date of receipt of the said request. Requests for an extension cannot be for more than 3 months. Applicants are reminded of the importance of retaining all documents proving expenditure of the awarded funds for submission with the final report.

**9.0 State aid**

Assistance provided under the de minimis regulation of these National Rules for Participation is in line with the terms and conditions of Commission Regulation EU 2023/2831 of 13 December 2023 on the application of Articles 107 and 108 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union to de minimis aid (OJ L, 2023/2831, 15.12.2023) (herein referred to as de minimis regulation (link below)).

The de minimis Regulation stipulates that a single undertaking cannot receive more than €300,000 in de minimis aid over 3 years, including de minimis aid from schemes offered by entities other than the Council. This period covers the year concerned as well as the previous two years.

Any de minimis aid received more than the established threshold will have to be recovered, with interest from the undertaking receiving the aid.

Assistance approved under this aid scheme is NOT:

i. Aid granted to undertakings active in the primary production of fishery and aquaculture products.

ii. Aid granted to undertakings active in the processing and marketing of fishery and aquaculture products, where the amount of the aid is fixed on the basis of price or quantity of products purchased or put on the market.

iii. Aid granted to undertakings active in the primary production of agricultural products.

iv. Aid granted to undertakings active in the processing and marketing of agricultural products, in one of the following cases:

a. Where the amount of the aid is fixed on the basis of the price or quantity of such products purchased from primary producers or put on the market by the undertakings concerned;

b. Where the aid is conditional on being partly or entirely passed on to primary producers.

v. Aid granted to export-related activities towards third countries or Member States, namely aid directly linked to the quantities exported, the establishment and operation of a distribution network or other current expenditure linked to the export activity.

vi. Aid contingent upon the use of domestic good and services over imported goods and services.

Where an undertaking is active in the sectors referred to in points (i), (ii), (iii) or (iv) above, and is also active in one or more of the other sectors falling within the scope of the de minimis Regulation or has other activities falling within the scope of the de minimis Regulation, the de minimis Regulation shall apply to aid granted in respect of the latter sectors or activities, provided that the Council ensures, by relying on appropriate means such as separation of activities or separation of accounts, that the activities in the sectors excluded from the scope of this Regulation do not benefit from the de minimis aid granted in accordance with this Regulation.

The rules on cumulation of aid as outlined in Article 5 of the de minimis Regulation (link below) will be respected.

In line with Article 6(1) of the de minimis Regulation, as of 1 January 2026, information on de minimis aid granted under this scheme shall be made publicly available in the central register at national or Union Level.

XJENZA MALTA shall retain the following records:

-• the identification of the beneficiary,

-• the aid amount,

-• the granting date,

-• the aid instrument, and

-• the sector involved on the basis of the statistical classification of economic activities in the Union (‘NACE classification’).

More information on the de minimis regulation can be found on the following link: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2023/2831>

**10.0 Correspondence**

Successful applicants will be required to communicate to horizon.malta@gov.mt and to Lili Kankaya at lili.vasileva@gov.mt at XJENZA MALTA regularly of any direct or indirect outputs resulting from the Award during and beyond the lifetime of the Scheme.

Successful Applicants are also required to submit a detailed report on the activities undertaken under the Award within thirty days from the date of completion of the activities funded by the Scheme. For those activities extending for the full duration of this Scheme (i.e. one year from the date on the signed letter of intent), final reports should be submitted to XJENZA MALTA by no later than 60 days from the said starting date. XJENZA MALTA reserves the right to take any necessary legal action should such reporting not be submitted.

Reference to the Award under the Scheme should be made on any publication, marketing or PR material that is generated in relation to the project or activity undertaken.

**11.0 Confidentiality of Submissions**

Unless otherwise indicated, all application submissions shall be treated in strict confidence.

The data collected by the Council via the application for the aid and its subsequent processing by the Council to evaluate data subject’s request for aid under the Scheme is in line with:

1. The National Rules for Participation;
2. COMMISSION REGULATION (EU) No 2023/2831 of 13 December 2023 on the application of Articles 107 and 108 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union to de minimis aid (de minimis Regulation;
3. Data Protection Act, Chapter 586 of the Laws of Malta and Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data, and repealing Directive 95/46/EC (General Data Protection Regulation).
4. The legitimate basis to process personal data submitted by the data subject by virtue of his/her written application for aid is Regulation 6 (1)(b) of the General Data Protection Regulation (“GDPR”), as ‘processing is necessary in order to take steps at the request of the data subject prior to entering into a contract’.

**12.0 Further Information**

For further information on the Scheme or the ERC, please send an email to horizon.malta@gov.mt or to:

Lili Kankaya

Senior Executive

Framework Programmes Unit

Email: lili.vasileva@gov.mt