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**COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT**

**Evaluation of the European Research Council Executive Agency (ERCEA)**

*Accompanying the document*

**REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE  
COUNCIL AND THE COURT OF AUDITORS**

**Evaluation of the Consumers, Health, Agriculture and Food Executive Agency, the  
Educational, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, the Executive Agency for  
Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises, the European Research Council Executive  
Agency, the Innovation and Networks Executive Agency and the Research Executive  
Agency**

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## Glossary

<i>Term or acronym</i>	<i>Meaning or definition</i>
Act of delegation	Commission Decision C(2013)9428 on delegating powers to the European Research Council Executive Agency with a view to performance of tasks linked to the implementation of Union programmes in the field of frontier research comprising, in particular, implementation of appropriations entered in the general budget of the Union
Act of establishment	Commission Implementing Decision 2013/779/EU of 17 December 2013 establishing the European Research Council Executive Agency
Agencies	Executive agencies
Commission	European Commission
EEA	European Economic Area
EFTA	European Free Trade Association
ERC	European Research Council
ERCEA	European Research Council Executive Agency
EU	European Union
FP7	the 'Ideas' specific programme implementing the 7th Framework Programme of the European Community for research, technological development and demonstration activities (2007-2013)
Framework Regulation for executive agencies	Council Regulation (EC) No 58/2003 of 19 December 2002 laying down the statute for executive agencies to be entrusted with certain tasks in the management of Community programmes
Horizon 2020	Horizon 2020, the 8th EU Framework Programme for research and innovation (2014-2020)
IT	Information technology

# 1 INTRODUCTION

## Purpose and scope of the evaluation/fitness check

The purpose of this evaluation is to assess the operations of the European Research Council Executive Agency (ERCEA or the Agency) from 16 July 2018 to 31 March 2021. Under Article 25 of the Framework Regulation for executive agencies<sup>1</sup>, the Commission must submit this evaluation to the European Parliament, the Council, the Court of Auditors and the Steering Committee of the Agency.

This evaluation concerns the Agency's operations according to its mandate under the 2014-2020 multiannual financial framework. The Commission entrusted the ERCEA with implementing the specific objective of strengthening frontier research by supporting the activities of the European Research Council for Part I – 'Excellent Science' of the specific programme implementing Horizon 2020, the Framework Programme for research and innovation (Horizon 2020 specific programme) and the legacy of the 'Ideas' specific programme implementing the 7th Framework Programme of the European Community for research, technological development and demonstration activities (the 'Ideas' specific programme, or FP7).

The ERCEA is governed by the Framework Regulation for executive agencies. An 'act of establishment'<sup>2</sup> sets out its mandate. An 'act of delegation'<sup>3</sup> specifies the tasks to be carried out and the powers delegated to the Agency to perform its mandate, as well as the decision establishing the ERCEA Steering Committee.

The European Research Council's remit is 'to encourage the highest-quality research in Europe through competitive funding, and to support investigator-driven frontier research across all fields on the basis of scientific excellence'<sup>4</sup>. The European Research Council (ERC) comprises a scientific council (the ERC Scientific Council), which sets out the overall scientific strategy, and the ERCEA as the dedicated implementation structure. The Agency implements the ERC's actions established in the ERC work programme and the Agency's annual work programme.

The Agency 'is dedicated to selecting and funding the excellent ideas that have not happened yet and the scientists that are dreaming them up'<sup>5</sup>. To this end, the ERC work programme offers five different types of grants: Starting, Consolidator, Advanced, Proof of Concept, and Synergy.

The Agency manages all programme implementation phases over a project's lifetime and its budget, concludes and manages public procurement contracts, and provides support during programme implementation, such as communication and information activities. It also gathers and processes information for the Commission and the ERC Scientific Council. Additionally, the Agency supports the ERC Scientific Council in all its tasks under Article 8(1) of the Horizon 2020 specific programme.

In line with the Commission's Better Regulation guidelines<sup>6</sup>, the evaluation applies the standard evaluation criteria, by assessing whether the Agency has carried out its tasks effectively and efficiently, whether there are any overlaps, gaps or inconsistencies in the Agency's management of

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<sup>1</sup> Council Regulation (EC) No 58/2003 of 19 December 2002 laying down the statute for executive agencies to be entrusted with certain tasks in the management of Community programmes, Official Journal L 11, 16 January 2003 p.1: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2003/58/oj>.

<sup>2</sup> Commission Implementing Decision 2013/779/EU of 17 December 2013 establishing the European Research Council Executive Agency

<sup>3</sup> Commission Decision C(2013)9428 on delegating powers to the European Research Council Executive Agency with a view to performance of tasks linked to the implementation of Union programmes in the field of frontier research comprising, in particular, implementation of appropriations entered in the general budget of the Union.

<sup>4</sup> ERC website <https://erc.europa.eu/homepage>

<sup>5</sup> ERCEA documents (annual activity reports and annual work programmes)

<sup>6</sup> Commission's Better Regulation guidelines SWD (2021) 305 final and [toolbox](#).

the programme portfolio, and whether tasks are delineated clearly between the ERCEA and the parent Directorate-General or other executive agencies (coherence)<sup>7</sup>.

The evaluation also assesses whether the Agency's operations have yielded the expected positive outcomes – as projected in the *ex ante* cost-benefit analysis and the specific financial statement for delegating tasks to executive agencies<sup>8</sup> – and identifies potential areas of improvement. To this end, the 2013 cost-benefit analysis's estimates and the related specific financial statement have been tested to provide evidence as to whether the assumptions made in them are valid by comparing them with the actual costs and benefits of the implementation of the programmes by the Agency. The aspects covered by the cost-benefit analysis are specified in Article 3(1) of the Framework Regulation<sup>9</sup> and in the guidelines on establishing and operating of executive agencies<sup>10</sup>.

The evaluation does not cover the achievements of the programmes managed by the ERCEA, which in turn are subject to mid-term and *ex post* evaluations. The evaluation of the ERCEA nevertheless provides useful input for these programme evaluations, as the Agency's performance affects the efficiency and effectiveness of the programmes it manages.

The evaluation of the ERCEA was supported by a study carried out by an external contractor<sup>11</sup>. The study combined a retrospective and prospective analysis. The retrospective part assessed the Agency's operations and its performance during the evaluation period, while the prospective part suggested recommendations for improving the Agency's future performance.

The evaluation of the Agency's performance is evidence-based, using a mixed methods complementary approach that combines:

- a qualitative approach, based on open-ended survey questions, interviews, documentary reviews and desk research
- a qualitative cost-benefit analysis and
- a quantitative approach, based on administrative and monitoring data, surveys and a quantitative cost-benefit analysis.

Relevant stakeholders were consulted through interviews and surveys (the Commission, the ERC Scientific Council and ERCEA staff, beneficiaries, unsuccessful applicants, and experts). Fewer unsuccessful applicants participated than beneficiaries. Overall, the response rate to the survey was lower than for the previous ERCEA evaluation<sup>12</sup> (Survey A<sup>13</sup> – 12.32% and Survey B<sup>14</sup> – 15.92%, excluding partial responses), but sufficient data was available to analyse each target group. Newer grants were represented more strongly in surveys than longer-running projects, which generated fewer observations on the finalisation of the project implementation phase or final payments than on the application and selection phases. The interviewees were helpful for contextualising, complementing

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<sup>7</sup> The Better Regulation guidelines were applied in a proportionate way. There was no need to assess the evaluation criteria of 'EU value added' and of 'relevance' as ERCEA carries out tasks, which the Commission has transferred to it and these criteria are assessed when evaluating the programmes.

<sup>8</sup> Cost-benefit analysis for the delegation of certain tasks regarding the implementation of 2014-2020 Union programmes to the executive agencies – Final report for the Commission of 19 August 2013.

<sup>9</sup> The cost-benefit analysis should include the following: identification of the tasks justifying outsourcing, a cost-benefit analysis which includes the costs of coordination and checks, the impact on human resources, possible savings in the general budgetary framework of the EU, efficiency and flexibility in the implementation of outsourced tasks, simplification of the procedures used, the proximity of outsourced activities to final beneficiaries, the visibility of the EU as promoter of the EU programme concerned, and the need to maintain an adequate level of know-how inside the Commission.

<sup>10</sup> Appendix II of the Guidelines for the establishment and operation of executive agencies financed from the Union budget (C (2014)9109 of 2 December 2014).

<sup>11</sup> PPMI Consortium: Public Policy Management Institute and IDEA Consult: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/a6202c1e-e5bd-11ee-8b2b-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-310469595>.

<sup>12</sup> Study supporting the evaluation of the European Research Council Executive Agency (ERCEA) 2015-2018.

<sup>13</sup> Survey A targeted individual recipients and their host institutions for the different types of grant based on applications for calls launched in 2018-2019-2020, and unsuccessful applicants and their host institutions for the different types of grant based on applications for calls launched in 2018-2019-2020-2021.

<sup>14</sup> Survey B targeted all external experts during the evaluation period (based on the date on which a claim for costs was created).

and deepening the quantitative findings and statistical trends, but not all of them provided exhaustive insights into the ERCEA's performance in each reference year, focusing rather on specific processes.

Overall, the evaluation of the Agency provides robust findings based on the triangulation of high-quality data collected through documentary reviews, desk research, cost-benefit analysis, stakeholder consultations (survey programme and interviews) and analysis of the in-depth study areas.

## **2 WHAT WAS THE EXPECTED OUTCOME OF THE INTERVENTION?**

### **2.1 Description of the intervention and its objectives**

According to the act of delegation, the aim of delegating certain tasks to the ERCEA in order to implement programmes is twofold.

- To enable the Commission to focus on its core institutional tasks, which cannot be outsourced, namely tasks assigned by the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union that require discretionary powers in translating political choices into action.
- To enable the Commission to achieve the objectives of the delegated EU programmes more effectively and efficiently. According to the 2013 cost-benefit analysis, delegating tasks to the ERCEA was estimated to be more cost-effective than keeping them 'in house' in the Commission. In addition, harnessing the Agency's accumulated experience and expertise would lead to efficiency gains.

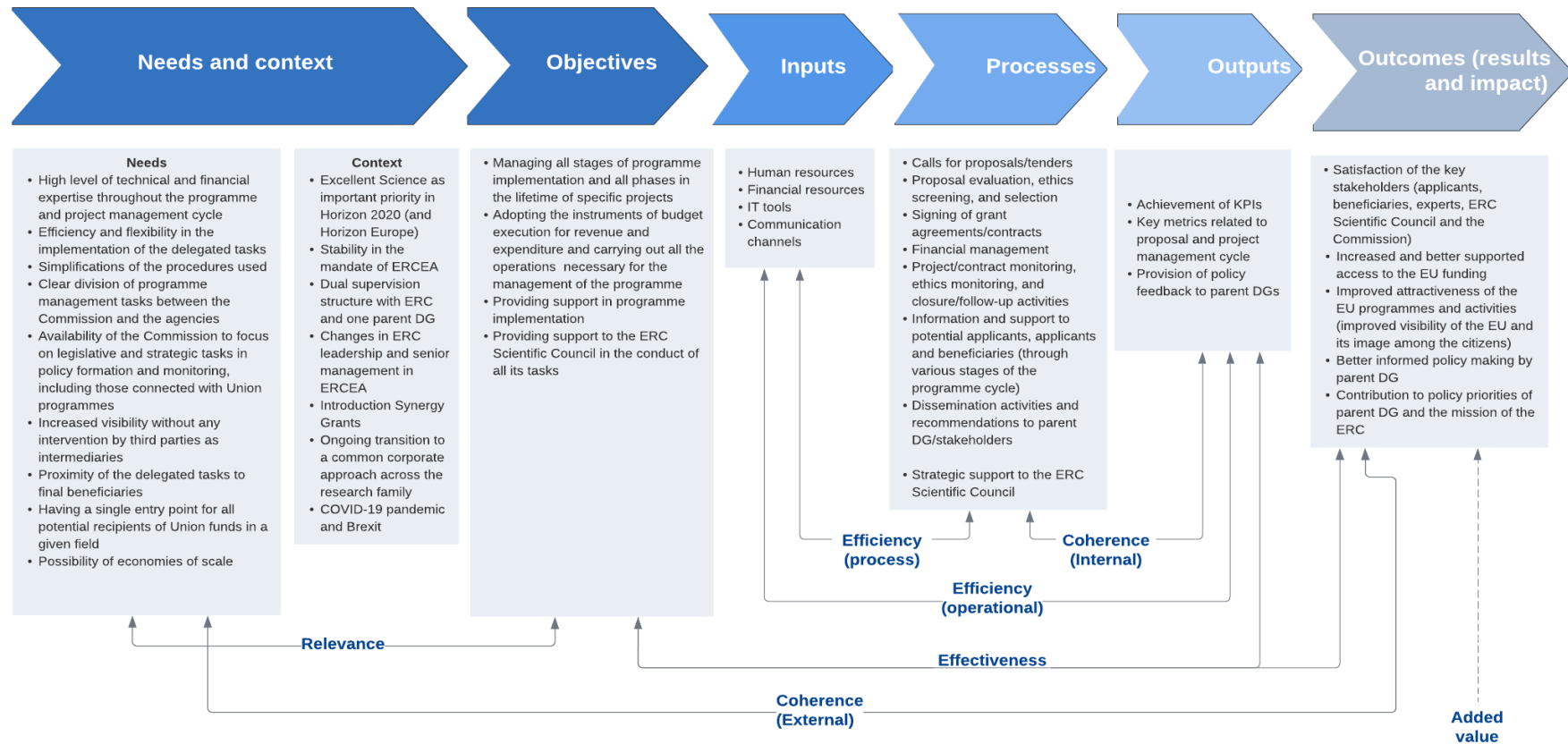
During the 2018-2021 period, the ERCEA helped to implement the following EU programmes:

- the specific objective 'Strengthening frontier research through the activities of the ERC' of Part I 'Excellence Science' of the Horizon 2020 specific programme;
- the legacy of the 'Ideas' specific programme implementing the 7th Framework Programme.

In this respect, the ERCEA performed programme and project implementation tasks and supported the ERC Scientific Council in all its tasks on the basis of the act of delegation and the relevant work programmes established by the ERC Scientific Council and adopted by the Commission.

The philosophy behind the intervention tallied with the Agency's objectives, tasks and activities, as established in its legal basis. It also considered the key contextual factors and events. The figure below summarises the intervention philosophy applied.

ERCEA's intervention logic



Source: Study supporting the triennial evaluation of the Agency

The key inputs are human resources, financial resources, IT tools and communication channels. The key processes are derived from the ERCEA's act of delegation, and the Agency's main performance outputs relate to how it manages the delegated programmes. The achievement of these outputs is reflected in key performance indicators: standard indicators of financial management that describe key metrics of the proposal and project management life cycle (e.g. number of calls, number of running projects, etc.) and support for the ERC Scientific Council. In addition, the evaluation considered the key outputs on feedback to policy.

Outcomes relate to the key results achieved during the evaluation period, from immediate outcomes to others in the medium to long term. Satisfaction among unsuccessful applicants, beneficiaries and experts about the Agency's performance was one of the key measurements of results. The EU's visibility as promoter of the programmes entrusted to the Agency was assessed by analysing the Agency's communication function. Better-informed policy-making by the parent Directorate-General and contributions to its policy priorities and to the ERC's remit can be assigned to the level of outcomes.

## **2.2 Baseline and points of comparison**

This evaluation of ERCEA operations assesses the actual costs and benefits of the ERCEA's programme implementation (executive agency scenario) compared with the alternative scenario of management by the Commission (in-house scenario). The reference points for this evaluation are therefore the 2013 *ex ante* cost-benefit analysis and the ERCEA's specific financial statement.

Compared with the in-house scenario, the estimated savings were worth EUR 66.6 million according to the specific financial statement, or EUR 42.2 million according to the 2013 cost-benefit analysis. Non-quantifiable benefits were also estimated, such as better-quality programme management and service delivery, improved visibility of EU programmes, and proximity to beneficiaries.

## **3 HOW HAS THE SITUATION EVOLVED OVER THE EVALUATION PERIOD?**

### *Current state of play*

The ERCEA was established in 2008 to implement the 'Ideas' specific programme, and its mandate was extended in 2014 to implement the successor programme in the form of the 'Excellent Science' pillar under the Horizon 2020 specific programme.

The ERC's funding strategy focuses exclusively on bottom-up frontier research and scientific excellence, based on the work programme established by the ERC Scientific Council and adopted by the Commission. This means that there are no predetermined priorities and that scientific excellence is the exclusive goal. Furthermore, experts are selected for the evaluation process with a view to ensuring the excellence of the evaluation and attracting top-class experts in order to do this.

The ERCEA exclusively implements the ERC work programme, which offers five different types of grant:

- 'Starting', for an early-career researcher with 2-7 years of experience since completing their PhD;
- 'Consolidator', for a researcher with 7-12 years of experience since completing their PhD;
- 'Advanced', for a well-established researcher to pursue a ground-breaking, ambitious project;
- 'Proof of Concept', for an ERC grant recipient to prepare the proof of concept of a new idea to facilitate the investigation of the commercial and social innovation potential of ERC-funded research;



- ‘Synergy’, for groups of two to four researchers to implement ambitious research projects, evaluated on the criteria of scientific excellence, which takes on the additional meaning of outstanding intrinsic synergetic effect.

The bywords for the ERCEA’s programming mandate are continuity and stability. All types of grant (with the exception of ‘Synergy’) were launched under the ‘Ideas’ specific programme and have continued under the Horizon 2020 specific programme. The Synergy grant was re-launched in 2018 after it had been piloted in 2012 and 2013. All grants are intended for single recipients, except for ‘Synergy’. A call for each type of grant has been opened annually, except in 2021 when only three calls were opened (‘Starting’, ‘Consolidator’ and ‘Advanced’) due to the late adoption of Horizon Europe (the successor programme to Horizon 2020).

In 2018, 2019 and 2021, between 8 200 and 8 500 proposals were submitted for the annual calls launched. In 2020, there was a far higher number of proposals (9 428), up 14.3% compared to 2019. Between approximately 1 100 and 1 250 grant agreements were signed each year, with the exception of 2021, when only 653 grant agreements were signed under Horizon 2020. The number of running projects ranged from 6 000 to 6 600 at the end of each year. This number increased from 2018 to 2020 but decreased slightly in 2021.

During the evaluation period, Agency staff numbers went up from 494 in 2018 to 515 in 2020. The average occupancy rate for posts was 98.3% between 2018 and 2020, but this fell to 94.2% in 2021, in part because of intensive recruiting by new or expanding agencies under the 2021-2027 multiannual financial framework, and perceptions of limited career progression felt by many staff and mentioned during interviews.

The ERCEA had an appropriate organisational structure and conducted several reorganisations to strengthen processes further, generate efficiencies, manage increased workloads and enhance synergies within the Agency (i.e. reorganisation of the Grant Management department and greater synergies between the Scientific Evaluation and Ethics Review Units, and between the respective internal and external communication functions). The Agency continued to operate smoothly despite changes in leadership (a new director in 2020, new ERC presidents in 2020 and 2021). Internal knowledge management process was identified by some interviewees as an area for improvement.

The ERCEA rose to the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic by switching to a remote working environment and applying staff teleworking. Several working groups were set up to respond to the changing circumstances and how they affected Agency staff.

The Agency’s administrative budget increased from EUR 48 million in 2018 to EUR 53 million in 2020. The operational budget also increased, from EUR 1 751 million in 2018 to EUR 2 088 million in 2020.

## **4 EVALUATION FINDINGS (ANALYTICAL PART)**

### **4.1 To what extent was the intervention successful and why?**

#### **Effectiveness**

For the evaluation, ‘effectiveness’ means how successfully the Agency achieved or progressed towards its objectives to the satisfaction of its stakeholders, and to its ability to react and adapt to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Agency operated within its legal framework in terms of programme implementation and the support it gave the ERC Scientific Council, continuously improved its operations, and achieved a high level of overall effectiveness, as demonstrated by its key performance indicators<sup>15</sup> and the high satisfaction ratings among stakeholders in surveys.

The ERCEA responded flexibly to the COVID-19 pandemic by swiftly transitioning to teleworking, adjusting processes and streamlining procedures while at the same time maintaining high performance standards. One such major adaptation took the form of remote evaluations (25 panels) and applicant interviews. Most stakeholders agreed that the transition from in-person to virtual activities had been managed smoothly by the Agency (90% of principal investigators and 96% of their host institutions, 55% of unsuccessful applicants and 77% of their host institutions, and 95% of experts). Despite the suspension of in-person activities and events, the ERCEA still managed to give information and advice effectively to applicants and beneficiaries, as the favourable survey responses show (88% of principal investigators and 100% of their host institutions, 59% of unsuccessful applicants and 77% of their host institutions, and 97% of experts).

The COVID-19 pandemic was responsible for a slowdown in grant awards and, at the same time, for an increase in project amendments. The Agency stepped up its efforts to simplify the procedures for amendments (2 466 in 2020; 1 141 in 2019). The ERCEA was highly efficient in processing amendments, approving or turning down requests within 45 days of receipt for an increasing proportion of grants (up from 98.3% in 2018 to 100% in 2021 for FP7 grants; up from 96.1% in 2018 to 99.9% in 2021 for Horizon 2020 grants). At the same time, 87% of principal investigators and 99% of their host institutions appreciated the Agency's flexibility in accommodating project amendments necessitated by the pandemic.

The prompt management of grants was appreciated by the vast majority of principal investigators and their host institutions surveyed (between 83% and 90%), who felt that the timescales – from the call deadline to the announcement of the outcome of the proposal (time-to-inform), from the announcement of the proposal's outcome to the signing of the contract (time-to-sign), and overall from the submission of the proposal to the signature of the grant agreement (time-to-grant) – were appropriate.

For the 2018-2020 period, the target for time-to-sign indicator was consistently met for all calls, but did register an increase in the number of days needed to sign agreements. Similarly, the time-to-grant indicator recorded an upward trend but the target was met for most calls with the exception of the Synergy grant in 2018 (460 days instead of the targeted 430 days).

The time-to-inform indicator had various targets for the 2018-2020 period for each type of grant and for each year: the longest was for Synergy grants (370 days) and the shortest for Proof of Concept grants (100 days). The indicator stayed within target, but with some variations in 2018 for the Synergy grant (342 days instead of 300) and the Consolidator grant (285 days instead of the targeted 280) due to a tight timetable for calls.

The Agency was able to execute payments much faster than reach targets for pre-financing and interim and final payments for both FP7 and Horizon 2020 and for experts, demonstrating highly efficient operations to the satisfaction of principal investigators (91%) and their host institutions (100%). 93% of principal investigators and 100% of their host institutions rated the process as smooth. 96% of experts agreed that payment deadlines had been satisfactory, and 93% were satisfied

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<sup>15</sup> The ERC has a derogation to set specific targets indicated in the ERCEA's annual work programme, pursuant to Article 20 of Regulation (EU) No 1290/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2013 laying down the rules for participation and dissemination in 'Horizon 2020 – the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (2014-2020)' and repealing Regulation (EC) No 1906/2006.

with how payments were processed. However, experts agreed less (72%) that the payment received had been commensurate with the work done. The reimbursement of costs from visits to Brussels was felt to be sufficient by a higher proportion of experts (76%) than in the previous evaluation (46%). The remote referees (who provide individual expertise on individual proposals) in the survey saw it as prestigious to be asked to work for the ERC (92%) and as important to engage in peer reviews to strengthen contributions to scientific improvements (97%).

With regard to budget execution, the Agency was able to implement its operational budget in terms of both commitment and payment appropriations, as it had done in the previous evaluation period. To this end, the Agency put in place an intensive monitoring system and was quick to follow up on financial and scientific reports.

The residual error rate remained within the 2% target for both FP7 grants (1.12% in 2018, 1.15% in 2019, 1.10% in 2020) and Horizon 2020 grants (1.22%). The ERCEA's programme risk profile is inherently lower than other programme components due to its specificities (e.g. single grant recipients, research institutes as host institutions, flat-rate overheads). The Agency had also taken steps to address the observations of the Court of Auditors in its opinion on the annual accounts.

The process the ERCEA uses to evaluate applications has been carefully designed to identify scientific excellence regardless of gender, age, nationality, institution, principal investigator or other potential bias. The evaluation process was perceived differently by successful applicants and unsuccessful applicants and their host institutions, particularly in terms of the outcome and feedback received. In this respect, principal investigators (92%) and their host institutions (93%) felt that the process of selecting high-quality research for funding was fair and transparent. The comments from individual reviewers and panels were seen as useful by 94% of principal investigators and by 92% of their host institutions. However, the survey showed that the Agency could still make feedback clearer, as only 40% of unsuccessful applicants and 59% of their host institutions felt that they had been given a clear explanation as to why their application had been turned down and helpful comments to improve proposals in view of re-submitting them to the ERC (25% of unsuccessful applicants and 47% of their host institutions) or to a different funding body (23% of unsuccessful applicants and 44% of their host institutions). Ultimately, 45% of unsuccessful applicants and 68% of their host institutions felt that the overall evaluation process had been clear and transparent.

The proportion of appeals upheld in the redress process was below 0.1% (0.03% in 2018, 0.04% in 2019, 0.03% in 2020).

To address the findings of the previous evaluation on ethics reviews and monitoring procedures, the Agency took a series of actions to simplify the process and improve the guidance documents made available to principal investigators and their host institutions, such as:

- decoupling interim payments from the monitoring of ethical clearance for grants with no highly sensitive ethics issues, while preserving the link between the final payment and a project's final ethical clearance;
- informing the principal investigators of projects with low or medium ethical sensitivity that some documents must be kept in the project file as requests for them could be forthcoming;
- pre-screening proposals made in-house before the official communication to candidates. This allowed the share of 'fast' ethical clearances at pre-screening to increase from 45% to more than 70%; only 30% of proposals had to be screened by the panel of ethical experts. This was first implemented under the 2021 call for Starting grants;

- organising remote panels of ethical experts during the COVID-19 crisis. The screening panels continued to be held remotely while assessment panels took place in person;
- setting up a continuous improvement group on ethics in 2020 to find ways of simplifying the ethics processes to make further efficiency gains.

Compared to the previous evaluation (29% of principal investigators and 35% of their host institutions), this evaluation's survey showed greater satisfaction with the above procedures: overall, 64% of principal investigators and 77% of their host institutions rated the ethics review process as smooth. Most principal investigators and their host institutions (between 66% and 79% of respondents) were positive about the clarity of the guidance material and information requested and the process timelines<sup>16</sup>. Certain respondents saw the amount of information as extensive and suggested specific training courses, such as video tutorials. However, most stakeholders (between 59% and 68% of respondents) saw the ethics review as helping to comply with ethical guidelines (national, EU or international) and related legislation.

Similarly, 65% of principal investigators and 78% of their host institutions felt that the ethics monitoring process had gone smoothly. Furthermore, between 67% and 82% agreed that the guidance materials and information requested had been clear.

The Agency provided the ERC Scientific Council with support that was effectively high in quality as well as technically and scientifically competent for all its tasks. It did so by performing analysis and providing advice and information on programme monitoring and evaluation, design and review, by supporting standing committees and working groups, and through communication and dissemination activities. The ERC Scientific Council members interviewed were very satisfied with the quality and quantity of ERCEA support received.

As regards stakeholder proximity during the application and submission phases, satisfaction rates among successful applicants in the surveys were generally higher than those among unsuccessful applicants. 82% of the host institutions of principal investigators said that they knew who to contact with questions when submitting applications, compared with 58% of the host institutions of unsuccessful applicants, 55% of principal investigators and 46% of unsuccessful applicants. Most of the host institutions of principal investigators (89%) felt that they had received prompt replies to their questions about the application or selection process, compared to 61% of the host institutions of unsuccessful applicants, 59% of principal investigators and 46% of unsuccessful applicants. Most stakeholders regarded the information for applicants as user-friendly (70 to 93%) and easy to find (84 to 95%) and felt that the eforms for applications and submissions were clear and easy to fill in (69 to 85%).

High satisfaction rates were registered with regard to communication actions during the implementation phase. Principal investigators and their host institutions (83 to 99%) felt that they knew who to contact or how to contact them. They also rated ERCEA staff as easy to reach and responsive, and said that they answered promptly, clearly and accurately.

The ERCEA demonstrated effective external communication through various channels such as its website, social media, press releases, publications, newsletters, awareness-raising activities on grant management, e.g. workshops for principal investigators and their host institutions, and events organised through national contact points. Overall, most stakeholders felt that the funding opportunities under the ERC programme were promoted effectively (88% of principal investigators

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<sup>16</sup> The percentage range represents the smallest and the highest percentage of positive answers for all the categories of respondents as indicated in Annex 7 to the supporting study.

and 86% of their host institutions, 71% of unsuccessful applicants and 75% of their host institutions, and 91% of external experts).

The ERCEA maintained the EU's visibility as programme promoter. Most stakeholders (89% to 100%) were aware that the ERC programme is funded from the EU budget, but significantly fewer (54% to 86%) were aware that the Commission had tasked the ERCEA with managing the programmes.

The surveys also showed high overall satisfaction with the services provided by the ERCEA (89% of principal investigators and 97% of their host institutions, 59% of unsuccessful applicants and 72% of their host institutions, 98% of experts). The stakeholders surveyed were very willing to work with the ERCEA again in the future (94% of principal investigators, 100% of their host institutions, 78% of unsuccessful applicants and 93% of their host institutions, 82% of experts), while the low success rate was cited as a reason for not re-applying by a majority of unsuccessful applicants (59%) and their host institutions (67%).

## Efficiency

This section considers the relationship between the Agency's resources and output. It covers factors such as the management and execution of programmes and the quality of financial and human resources management during the evaluation period. It also features an analysis of the administrative and regulatory workloads and examines simplification aspects. These areas are covered by key performance indicators and additional survey data.

The ERCEA's programme and grant portfolio was in line with the portfolio envisaged in the 2013 *ex ante* cost-benefit analysis and in the specific financial statement.

Overall, the ERCEA's actual workload during the evaluation period tallied with the initial estimates in the 2013 cost-benefit analysis and in the specific financial statement, as illustrated below by the main indicators (in EUR million or as a %):

	2018	2019	2020
Operational budget, commitments	1 999	2 103	2 218
Operational budget, payments	1 751	2 012	2 087
Administrative budget, commitments	48.60	51.51	52.03
Administrative budget, payments	47.98	51.04	52.97
Number of staff <sup>17</sup> (at the end of the year)	494	508	515
Number of operational staff <sup>18</sup>	438	448	464
Programme management cost ratio (commitments)	2.41%	2.39%	2.34%
Programme management cost ratio (payments)	2.74%	2.54%	2.54%
Budget 'per operational head' (commitments)	6.41	6.57	6.16
Proposals received	8 352	8 247	9 428
Total running projects	6 077	6 151	6 553
Running projects 'per operational head'	19.34	18.72	18.11

<sup>17</sup> Actually filled.

<sup>18</sup> Actually filled.

The ERCEA is a cost-effective structure in terms of managing delegated programmes, as demonstrated by the cost ratio between administrative and operational expenditure (2.7% in 2018; 2.5% in 2019 and 2020).

The operational budget allocated to the Agency for the 2014-2020 period from the EU contribution amounted to EUR 12.56 billion, in line with estimates in the specific financial statement. In addition, the Agency received contributions from the EEA/EFTA and third- countries (EUR 933 million) that were not included in the initial estimates. In total, the ERCEA's operational budget for the 2014-2020 period was EUR 13.5 billion, 7% higher than the specific financial statement estimates.

Under the 2014-2020 calls, the actual number of proposals received (58 207) was much lower than initial cost-benefit analysis estimates (88 150). This might be due in part to the restrictions on re-submitting proposals. Owing to the previous upward trend in resubmissions, the ERC Scientific Council had applied curbs in order to keep experts' workloads at a reasonable level – and thus avoid compromising evaluation quality – and to maintain the overall success rate at a level of around 15%, whereas the cost-benefit analysis had forecast a drop to 8 to 9%.

The actual number of new grants (7 832) managed by the ERCEA, which is the main workload driver for the Agency, was 10% higher than the projected figure in the 2013 cost-benefit analysis (7 137 grants). The increased number of grants related primarily to the additional contributions from the EEA/EFTA and third countries and higher allocations for grant schemes with lower average grant size ('Proof of Concept' and 'Starting' grants). The ERCEA successfully maintained the initial projected productivity level in the 2013 cost-benefit analysis, as the actual 'per head' budget ratio<sup>19</sup> in 2020 (EUR 4.33 million) remained very close to estimates (EUR 4.39 million).

During the evaluation period, the Agency adopted several measures aimed at simplifying its procedures. These involved simplifying grant management procedures and applying corporate and local IT tools. The 'Continuous Improvement' programme launched in 2020 played a part in this simplification, as it aimed to increase productivity while easing pressures on staff. It was a bottom-up exercise to collect ideas and identify opportunities for improvement. The initiative identified nine improvement topics, resulting in 11 projects that yielded positive outcomes, such as quicker and simpler amendment processes and enlisting of remote referees more efficiently.

The use of IT tools has reduced the overall administrative workload. The availability of new functionalities developed at corporate level for programming was evaluated and specific IT solutions developed locally were phased out after a careful assessment that took into account the specificities of the ERCEA's business processes. Overall, progress was made towards greater alignment with the Commission's systems.

The Agency acted to further improve its IT tool efficiency and use of IT tools. It updated its guidance and procedures to ensure greater uptake of the enhanced monitoring tool<sup>20</sup> in the SyGMA corporate system among scientific officers. The Agency began using the 'Participant Portal Grant Management Service' electronic exchange system to keep track of communication records; direct emails continued to be used for intermediate communication. The Agency also planned to improve the IT tools used in programming and evaluation procedures and aim for greater automation.

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<sup>19</sup> The calculation of the 'per head' budget ratio in 2020 was based on the following estimates: budget – executed commitment appropriations (EUR 2 227.56 million); number of staff – posts actually filled at the end of the year (515).

<sup>20</sup> In the event of issues with projects, scientific officers can perform additional controls and activate the consolidated monitoring tool in the SyGMA risk module.

Most stakeholders felt that the following simplifications made their lives easier as regards the process of application and project implementation: the harmonisation of funding rules and procedures across programmes (53 to 78%), the simplification and clarification of call guidelines and application forms (66 to 80%), the simplified granting process (61 to 82%), reporting templates (66 to 87%) and the ethics review procedure and ethics workflow monitoring (60 to 72%), the establishment of a single point of contact for individual organisations/host institutions (64 to 85%), the use of simplified cost options instead of real-cost funding (69 to 84%), and the wider use of common IT tools across different programmes and programme strands (62 to 80%).

In terms of future simplifications, respondents mainly identified more user-friendly IT tools for project management and reporting (86 to 92%) and for submitting applications (78 to 91%), further harmonisation of administrative requirements for projects financed under different programmes and actions (74 to 88%), and the further simplification of granting and reporting requirements (78 to 84%).

During the evaluation period, the ERCEA provided an appropriate organisational structure, striking a balance between operational staff and administrative support staff (from 13% in 2018 to 11% in 2020). It allocated resources flexibly as dictated by workload fluctuations (via annual workload planning and reorganisations). It also adapted promptly and effectively to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, thereby supporting efficient programme implementation.

## **Coherence**

Coherence looks at any overlaps and complementarities within the Agency's programme portfolio and the delimitation of responsibilities between the Agency and its parent Directorate-General. Other questions involved the extent to which the Agency was able to provide feedback to policy to its parent Directorate-General.

In the ERCEA's case there was strong coherence and continuity in terms of the programmes managed, as the ERCEA is the only structure to implement the EU programme dedicated to bottom-up frontier research focused on scientific excellence, starting with the 'Ideas' specific programme and continuing with its successor programme, the 'Horizon 2020 specific programme'. When allocating this portfolio, there were no identifiable programming synergies with other parts of EU framework programmes.

The ERCEA's mandate is also characterised by stability, since its governance structure and types of grant have stayed the same (except for the relaunch of 'Synergy' in 2018), enabling the Agency progressively to build its know-how and expertise.

The Agency is governed by a steering committee, comprising representatives of the parent Directorate-General (Directorate-General for Research and Innovation) and the ERC Scientific Council.

The delineation of responsibilities between the ERCEA and the parent Directorate-General is clear and appropriate and there are no overlaps, gaps or inconsistencies, in line with the legal framework (e.g. act of delegation, memorandum of understanding with the parent Directorate-General). However, the survey revealed little awareness among stakeholders about how tasks were delineated between the Agency, the ERC Scientific Council and the Commission (29% of principal investigators and 26% of unsuccessful applicants, 66% of the host institutions of principal investigators, 50% of the host institutions of unsuccessful applicants, and 53% of experts).

The parent Directorate-General is responsible for supervising the programme implementation and overseeing the execution of the Agency's budget. To this end, a monitoring and reporting mechanism

is in place, in particular through the annual work programme, the mid-year report and the Agency's annual activity report.

The Commission-led harmonisation of processes and tools yielded benefits and efficiencies, but also required a balance between harmonisation and customisation to meet the specific needs and characteristics of the ERC programme. This process of harmonisation necessitated system adaptations in close cooperation with the Commission. Overall, the Agency and the Commission were able to find appropriate solutions to the specificities of the ERC programme (such as adapting reporting templates). To this end, the ERCEA was invited to contribute to the process of designing common procedures and processes managed by the Common Support Centre<sup>21</sup>, which establishes the framework for harmonised implementation by the funding bodies implementing grants, in areas such as common business processes, IT, legal, audit, and information and data services. Trilateral meetings took place between the Agency, the Common Support Centre and the ERC Scientific Council with a focus on specific and technical topics.

By delegating specific tasks to the Agency, the Commission was able to focus on policy-related tasks. To this end, the Agency provided feedback to policy to the parent Directorate-General on request. It also gave relevant feedback, analysis and data to the ERC Scientific Council. Broader initiatives to strengthen feedback to policy were the 'Science behind the project initiative', the *ex post* peer review-based assessment of completed ERC projects, and the ERC research information system (ERIS)<sup>22</sup>.

#### **4.2. Cost-benefit analysis**

A retrospective cost-benefit analysis was carried out for the 2018-2020 period, based on the assumptions laid down in the 2013 cost-benefit analysis and the specific financial statement, coupled with the Agency's actual costs.

Compared with the in-house scenario, actual savings during the 2018-2020 period were 23.4% higher compared to the initial specific financial statement estimates (EUR 82.2 million compared to EUR 66.6 million), and 94.8% higher compared to the initial estimates in the 2013 cost-benefit analysis (EUR 82.2 million compared to EUR 42.2 million). As forecast, the savings under the executive agency scenario were primarily the result of higher numbers of lower-cost external staff (contract agents and seconded national experts) employed by the Agency and lower overall staff numbers.

The overall actual costs of the executive agency scenario amounted to EUR 155.1 million during the 2018-2020 period, including contributions from EEA/EFTA and third countries (EUR 6.4 million in 2018-2020). Based exclusively on the EU contribution, the actual costs were EUR 148.7 million, which tallied with the initial estimates in the specific financial statement (EUR 149.2 million), with savings of EUR 0.5 million or 0.4% of the specific financial statement estimates).

As in the previous evaluation, the actual administrative costs under 'Staff-related expenditure' (Title I) were higher than the estimates in the specific financial statement, which did not take into account additional costs linked to salary indexation, promotions and the increasing seniority of staff. The average cost of temporary agents in the Agency was higher than the average cost used when

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<sup>21</sup> The common support centre is a directorate within the Commission's DG Research and Innovation. It provides services in the areas of legal support, ex-post audit, information technology systems and operations, business processes and programme information and data to the whole of the research DG family, executive agencies and joint undertakings implementing Horizon 2020. It was re-named the common implementation centre under the 2021-2027 multiannual financial framework.

<sup>22</sup> Developed by the ERCEA to present and manage information on ERC funding activities and projects.



making the initial estimates. The composition of staff (ratio between temporary staff and contract staff) tallied with estimates.

Higher staff expenditure was offset by lower expenditure under Title II – Infrastructure and operating expenditure and Title III – Programme support expenditure compared with specific financial statement estimates (56% of estimates). For Title II, these savings related in part to the overestimated necessary average costs of the ERCEA’s infrastructure and operating expenditure (projected to be 20 to 52% higher than for other executive agencies).

## **5 WHAT ARE THE CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED?**

### **5.1 Conclusions**

The Agency achieved its core objectives on programme implementation effectively and efficiently, including executing the budget and providing quality support to the ERC Scientific Council in all its tasks, as demonstrated by the key performance indicators and the levels of satisfaction recorded in surveys. This in turn enabled the Commission to focus on its core institutional tasks.

The Agency’s mandate was consistent in programming terms, as it implemented a research framework part related to frontier research focused on scientific excellence across a diverse thematic spectrum, specific for a bottom-up approach. Tasks were clearly delineated between the ERCEA and the parent Directorate-General.

Delegating programme implementation to the ERCEA remained considerably more cost-effective than the Commission in-house scenario, generating significant cost savings in the EU budget and good value for money, as shown by the findings of the retrospective cost-benefit analysis.

### **5.2. Lessons learned**

The main lessons learned are ensuring channels for discussing the harmonisation of procedures and the optimisation of processes across agencies, continuing the ‘Continuous Improvement Programme’ to identify potential efficiency gains, enhancing synergies and opportunities for joint communication activities, providing meaningful feedback to policy, continuing implementing and updating the HR strategy based on staff feedback, and further consolidating information in the reporting mechanisms.

Cooperation and flows of information between the Agency and the Commission and other executive agencies will continue through various forums and working groups to build a common vision on the harmonisation of procedures and processes, share best practices, and explore various synergies between agencies. Additionally, the ‘Continuous Improvement’ programme launched by the Agency in 2020 will continue to identify improvements aimed at increasing productivity and easing staff workloads.

Enhancing collaboration between the ERCEA and the parent Directorate-General on communication activities will contribute to firmly embedding joint communication planning, joint campaigns, sharing information, and re-using communication content.

Since its foundation in 2008, the Agency has developed solid knowledge on programme implementation, which is needed for policy-making by the parent Directorate-General and by the ERC Scientific Council when preparing work programmes. The Agency provided feedback to policy to its parent Directorate-General at its request; from 2021, it switched to a more proactive and structured approach when a Feedback-to-Policy framework was established under 2021-2027 multiannual financial framework.

The ERCEA's staff engagement index (measuring staff satisfaction) was high, reaching 73% in 2018. The Agency will continue adopting appropriate action plans with close staff involvement based on the feedback received from staff surveys. Close cooperation on HR matters between agencies will yield benefits in terms of knowledge sharing, enhancing synergies, and harmonised procedures and processes.

Finally, in terms of reporting requirements, the Agency will constantly enhance the available data by providing qualitative information not captured by quantitative indicators, such as explanations on the changes to key indicators and trends and distinguish between structural changes and occasional or technical factors. Similarly, clarifying expectations and timelines will facilitate preparations for Steering Committee meetings.

## ANNEX I - PROCEDURAL INFORMATION

The evaluation had a clearly established scope:

- The reference period of the evaluation ran from 16 July 2018 to 31 March 2021.
- The purpose of this evaluation was to assess the operation of ERCEA as per the criteria of effectiveness, efficiency and coherence. During the evaluation period, ERCEA implemented the ERC work programmes as set by the ERC Scientific Council and was in charge with day-to-day grant management.
- The evaluation did not focus on the operational achievements of the ERC programme.
- The agencies established under 2021-2027 multiannual financial framework were outside the scope of this evaluation.

The evaluation of ERCEA was part of the evaluation of all the six agencies, which was made in a coordinated manner based on a supporting study carried out by an external contractor. The preparations for the evaluation started in 2022, when an interservice group was set up by all lead parent Directorates-General and the concerned central services (Directorate-General for Budget and the Secretariat-General). The group meetings (i.e. 6) were chaired by the Common Implementation Centre, set up within the Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, who also ensured the secretariat. The evaluation of each agency was led by the respective lead parent Directorate-General (PLAN/2022/1912). The Commission also launched a ‘call for evidence’ on 10 March 2023 on its ‘Have your say’ portal. The call was open for feedback on agencies activities until 7 April 2023.

The methodology used for the evaluation was consistent across the agencies in accordance with the criteria provided in the Commission’s Better Regulation guidelines. The assessment of the evaluation criteria ‘EU added value’, i.e. why the EU should act, was not considered relevant as each agency carries out tasks which the Commission transferred to it. The EU added value of the programmes that each agency manages is assessed in the context of the programme evaluations.

Evidence was taken from sources such as the Commission databases, annual reporting exercises, adopted decisions. The supporting study was prepared using a mixed-methods approach at the levels of methodologies and methods and worked on a qualitative methodological approach (based on documentary review and desk research, interviews, answers to open-ended survey questions and qualitative cost-benefit analysis) combined with a quantitative methodological approach (based on administrative and monitoring data, surveys and quantitative cost-benefit analysis), as detailed in Annex II.

Knowledge from the present evaluation will inform internal decision-making in the Agency and its parent Directorate-General on possible improvements to the implementation of the programme.

Furthermore, the results of the evaluation will be useful for accountability purposes. The final evaluation reports regarding the performance of the six agencies will allow the Commission to report the results of the retrospective cost-benefit analysis to the budgetary authority, while informing various European Union institutions on the savings achieved and identifying potential areas for improvement. The results of this evaluation will be communicated to the Steering Committee of the Agency, to the European Parliament, the Council, and the European Court of Auditors.

## ANNEX II - METHODOLOGY AND ANALYTICAL MODELS USED

The evaluation was supported by a study carried out by an external contractor in accordance with the criteria provided in the Commission's Better Regulation guidelines. The methodology for ERCEA evaluation was consistent with the approaches employed for the evaluations of the other agencies.

The evaluation followed an evidence-based and mixed-methods approach, using qualitative and quantitative data to answer evaluation questions in a complementary manner, i.e. the results of quantitative methods were used to enhance the understanding of the qualitative results, and *vice versa*. Triangulation of data sources strengthened the validity of the findings. The study was structured around a series of evaluation questions outlined in the Annex to the study.

The evaluation relied on the evidence gathered and analysed based on:

- Extensive documentary review and desk research on legal documents, information on ERCEA's relations with its parent Directorate-General, and data on its financial and non-financial performance, including the memorandum of understanding, the annual work programmes, the annual activity reports, staff surveys and workload, IT, procedures, continuous improvement, internal and external communication, minutes of the Steering Committee meetings, results of audits performed by the Court of Auditors and the IAS, and information on actions taken after the previous evaluation of ERCEA. An in-depth analysis was conducted on IT developments and the Continuous Improvement Programme.
- Interview programme: 40 interviews with 56 interviewees were conducted, representing the main stakeholders and exceeding the initial goal of 35 interviews. This was structured in three stages:
  - The scoping phase consisted of exploratory and scoping interviews with Commission and Agency staff, targeting those who had a strategic outlook and were familiar with the overall key developments that took place during the evaluation period. (2 interviewees for parent Directorate-General; three interviewees for ERCEA).
  - The main phase consisted of semi-structured interviews, having each survey questionnaire tailored to each interview target group to ensure that all evaluation questions and all aspects of the organisational model were covered (29 interviews with 35 persons – Commission staff and ERCEA staff)
  - The follow-up phase consisted of in-depth interviews to contextualise and deepen the understanding of the data emerging during the previous stages of the interview programme and the data collection process overall. A small group of stakeholders was targeted, including Commission and Agency staff, but also beneficiaries, unsuccessful applicant, and experts.
- Survey programme: Two surveys were conducted as part of the evaluation:
  - Survey A targeted the beneficiaries, unsuccessful applicants, and their host institutions for the different types of grants and based on applications for calls launched in 2018-2019-2020 (and 2021 for host institutions and unsuccessful applicants). The total population targeted amounted to 1233 and the overall response rate was of 16.22%, including partial responses (17.95% response rate for principal investigators and 12.61% for their host institutions, 20.58% for unsuccessful applicants and 10.90% for their host institutions). Excluding partial responses, the overall response rate was 12.32%.

- Survey B targeted external experts involved in evaluation panels, remote reviews, project monitoring, ethics review and monitoring in the evaluation period (based on cost claim creation date). The total number of experts targeted was 3261 and the response rate was 18.49% (including partial responses) and respectively 15.92% (excluding partial responses).
- Cost-Benefit Analysis included an analysis of workload and cost-effectiveness, by comparing the actual indicators with the estimates foreseen in the 2013 ex ante cost-benefit analysis and respectively the specific financial statement.

### **Limitations and robustness of the findings**

Overall, the evaluation of ERCEA provides robust findings built on the triangulation of high-quality data collected through a documentary review, desk research, cost-benefit analysis, stakeholder consultation activities (the survey programme and interviews) and an in-depth analysis of some areas.

All relevant stakeholders were consulted via interviews and surveys, however the response rate to the survey has been lower than the one registered in the previous evaluation of ERCEA<sup>23</sup>, which could be due to survey fatigue. Despite this, it was still largely sufficient to perform analyses per target group (principal investigators and their host institutions, unsuccessful applicants and their host institutions). In cases where due to further filtering, the number of observations was too low, the findings were not reported.

Recently selected grants were more strongly represented than longer running projects. Information related to the finalisation of the project implementation phase or final payments for instance were therefore based on less observations than those related to the application and selection phases.

The exploratory and in-depth interviews were especially useful for the contextualisation, complementing and deepening the quantitative findings and statistical trends observed, however not all interviewees were able to provide exhaustive insights on the performance of ERCEA in all the years under consideration. For instance, some interviewees from the parent Directorate-General were interacting with the Agency only since (very) recently and were able to shed light on recent interactions. Other interviews focused on very specific processes only, which was useful to deepen the understanding of these processes and thus contributed to a limited extent to the more overarching analysis.

To the extent possible, the analysis of the evaluation questions was also informed by a comparison with the results of the previous evaluation (2014-2017). The triangulation approach ensured the robustness and reliability of the data and information used to draw up conclusions and recommendations. However, due to their nature (notably on coherence), the evaluation largely relied on desk research and interview data. This was mitigated by the extensiveness of the interview programme, involving the Commission, ERC Scientific Council and ERCEA staff from various levels of management as well as experts, beneficiaries and unsuccessful applicants.

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<sup>23</sup> Study Supporting the Evaluation of the European Research Council Executive Agency (ERCEA) 2015 – 2018.

### **ANNEX III - EVALUATION MATRIX AND ANSWERS TO THE EVALUATION QUESTIONS (BY CRITERION)**

The core task of the evaluation was to respond to evaluation questions relating to the effectiveness, efficiency, coherence, as defined by the Better Regulation guidelines. Evidence-based answers, including the points of comparison and sources, can be found in Section 4 of the study supporting the evaluation performed by an external evaluator<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/a6202c1e-e5bd-11ee-8b2b-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-310469595>

#### **ANNEX IV - OVERVIEW OF BENEFITS AND COSTS**

The benefits and costs are detailed in the cost-benefit analysis in Section 4.2 and Annex V below.

## ANNEX V - COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS

A cost-benefit analysis was performed to assess the actual situation when compared with the estimates in 2013 cost-benefit analysis and specific financial statement. The following approach was adopted:

- To use data on the actual performance of ERCEA for the executive agency scenario (actual execution of the administrative budget, actual staffing, etc.).
- To follow the assumptions laid down in the 2013 cost-benefit analysis and specific financial statement to ensure the comparability and validity of results, and to provide estimates of the comparable ‘actual’ in-house scenario (the comparator) that would best reflect the actual situation.
- To assess based on these estimates whether the conclusions of the *ex ante* assessment in cost-benefit analysis and specific financial statement are still valid when compared with the actual situation, and what the overall possible savings are.

To deconstruct the ‘actual’ in-house scenario (‘the comparator’), estimates were based on the following cost-benefit analysis/specific financial statement assumptions:

- Number and composition of staff in the Commission under an in-house scenario correspond to specific financial statement estimations. Additional contract agents were added to the estimated Commission staff number for 2018-2020 period (14 contract agents in 2018, 9 contract agents in 2019 and 2020) to reflect the additional authorised staff in ERCEA to manage the additional budget from the contributions of EEA/EFTA that was not covered in the resource calculations in the 2013 cost-benefit analysis and specific financial statement.
- Commission staff costs and overheads correspond to the average costs set by Directorate-General for Budget for the estimates of human resources and overheads in legislative financial statements for the respective year.
- Programme support expenditure (Title III) remains the same under both the in-house scenario and the executive agency scenario.

The table below presents the results of the analysis of the estimated actual costs of the in-house scenario and the actual costs of the executive agency scenario.



*Estimated actual costs of the in-house scenario and the actual costs of the executive agency scenario, EUR*

	2018		2019		2020		Total 2018-2020
	No.	Cost	No.	Cost	No.	Cost	
<b>In-house scenario</b>							
<b>Commission</b>							
<b>Title I. Staff-related expenditure</b>	<b>590.4</b>	<b>57 361 500</b>	<b>609.0</b>	<b>61 488 000</b>	<b>641.5</b>	<b>66 271 500</b>	<b>185 121 000</b>
Temporary Agents	403.5	48 016 500	420	51 660 000	442.7	55 337 500	<b>155 014 000</b>
Contract Agents	186.9	9 345 000	189.0	9 828 000	198.8	10 934 000	<b>30 107 000</b>
<b>Title II. Infrastructure and operating expenditure</b>		<b>14 169 600</b>		<b>15 225 000</b>		<b>16 037 500</b>	<b>45 432 100</b>
<b>Title III. Programme support expenditure</b>		<b>2 672 790</b>		<b>2 537 129</b>		<b>1 456 300</b>	<b>6 666 219</b>
<b>TOTAL COST</b>	<b>590.4</b>	<b>74 203 890</b>	<b>609.0</b>	<b>79 250 129</b>	<b>641.5</b>	<b>83 765 300</b>	<b>237 219 319</b>
<b>Executive agency scenario</b>							
<b>ERCEA</b>							
<b>Title I. Staff-related expenditure</b>	<b>494</b>	<b>37 970 591</b>	<b>508</b>	<b>40 559 573</b>	<b>515</b>	<b>42 006 374</b>	<b>120 536 537</b>
Temporary Agents	120	15 375 191	126	16 476 910	128	17 453 595	<b>49 305 695</b>
Contract Agents	363	19 209 529	371	20 711 076	372	21 099 003	<b>61 019 608</b>
Seconded National Experts	11	475 502	11	557 382	15	780 618	<b>1 813 503</b>
Interim supportive agents and trainees		883 870		577 352		553 670	<b>2 014 893</b>
Professional development and recruitment costs		2 026 498		2 236 852		2 119 487	<b>6 382 838</b>
<b>Title II. Infrastructure and operating expenditure</b>		<b>7 963 829</b>		<b>8 416 138</b>		<b>8 575 288</b>	<b>24 955 255</b>
<b>Title III. Programme support expenditure</b>		<b>2 672 790</b>		<b>2 537 129</b>		<b>1 456 300</b>	<b>6 666 219</b>
<b>Total ERCEA cost:</b>		<b>48 607 210</b>		<b>51 512 840</b>		<b>52 037 962</b>	<b>152 158 012</b>
<b>Commission</b>							
<b>Title I. Staff-related expenditure</b>	<b>8.0</b>	<b>745 000</b>	<b>8.0</b>	<b>771 000</b>	<b>8.0</b>	<b>790 000</b>	<b>2 306 000</b>
Temporary Agents	5.0	595 000	5.0	615 000	5.0	625 000	<b>1 835 000</b>
Contract Agents	3.0	150 000	3.0	156 000	3.0	165 000	<b>471 000</b>
<b>Title II. Infrastructure and operating expenditure</b>		<b>192 000</b>		<b>200 000</b>		<b>200 000</b>	<b>592 000</b>
<b>Total Commission cost:</b>		<b>937 000</b>		<b>971 000</b>		<b>990 000</b>	<b>2 898 000</b>
<b>TOTAL COST</b>	<b>502.0</b>	<b>49 544 210</b>	<b>516.0</b>	<b>52 483 840</b>	<b>523.0</b>	<b>53 027 962</b>	<b>155 056 012</b>
<b>ESTIMATED SAVINGS</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>24 659 680</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>26 766 290</b>	<b>119</b>	<b>30 737 338</b>	<b>82 163 307</b>

Source: Study supporting the triennial evaluation of the Agency

The analysis concluded that:

- The overall actual costs of the executive agency scenario<sup>25</sup> constituted EUR 155.1 million during 2018-2020. The estimates in the specific financial statement (EUR 149.2 million

<sup>25</sup> Including the cost of coordination and monitoring by the Commission and the costs covered from EEA/EFTA and third country contributions.

during 2018-2020) were based on the EU contribution, but ERCEA's administrative budget also included contributions from EEA/EFTA and third countries (EUR 6.4 million for 2018-2020). Consequently, based on the EU contribution only, the actual costs of the executive agency scenario constituted EUR 148.7 million, which means that the actual costs corresponded to the initial estimations (with savings of EUR 0.5 million or 0.4 % of the specific financial statement estimates).

- The costs of the executive agency scenario were much lower than the estimated costs of the in-house scenario. In 2018-2020, the actual cost savings deriving from a cost difference between the executive agency scenario and the in-house scenario constituted EUR 82.2 million (or 34.6 % of the estimated costs under the in-house scenario).
- Comparing the savings initially estimated in the specific financial statement and cost-benefit analysis with the actual savings from the delegation of tasks to ERCEA, the actual savings during 2018-2020 period were 23.4% higher compared to the initial specific financial statement estimates (EUR 82.2 million compared to EUR 66.6 million), and 94.8% higher compared to the initial cost-benefit analysis estimates (EUR 82.2 million compared to EUR 42.2 million). As forecasted in the specific financial statement and the *ex ante* cost-benefit analysis, savings of the executive agency scenario resulted primarily from a higher share of lower-cost external personnel (contract agents and seconded national experts) and a lower overall number of staff<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> The number of staff under the executive agency scenario was reduced; however, the in-house scenario was not amended in the specific financial statement.

## ANNEX VI – STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATION – SYNOPSIS REPORT

This annex summarises the stakeholder consultation conducted for the evaluation on the basis of the ‘Better Regulation’ guidelines. A similar approach was adopted for the evaluation of all six agencies.

### 1. Outline of the consultation strategy

The consultation strategy was designed as follows:



Source: Study supporting the triennial evaluation of the Agency

To reflect the scope of the Agency’s activities, the consultation included various categories of stakeholders, in particular Commission staff from the parent Directorate-General, Agency staff, Steering Committee and ERC Scientific Council members, ERC programme beneficiaries, unsuccessful applicants, and external experts. Two surveys, an extensive interview programme and the triangulation of various data sources were conducted.

Consultation activity		Target groups	Date
Surveys	Survey A	ERC programme beneficiaries and unsuccessful applicants: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>individual recipients of the different types of grant, based on applications for calls launched in 2018-2019-2020;</li> <li>host institutions for the different types of grant, based on applications for calls launched in 2018-2019-2020-2021;</li> <li>unsuccessful applicants for the different types of grant, based on applications for calls launched in 2018-2019-2020-2021.</li> </ul>	29 November - 12 December 2022
	Survey B	External experts in the evaluation period (based on the date on which a claim for costs was created).	29 November - 12 December 2022
Interview programme		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Commission staff from the parent Directorate-General</li> <li>ERCEA Directorate</li> <li>ERCEA heads and representatives of units</li> <li>members of the ERCEA Steering Committee and Scientific Council</li> <li>ERCEA programme beneficiaries and unsuccessful applicants</li> <li>external experts</li> </ul>	25 August 2022 - 31 January 2023

Source: Study supporting the triennial evaluations of the Agency

These different types of stakeholder consultation complemented each other. The survey of unsuccessful applicants, beneficiaries and external experts, and interviews with these stakeholders, provided information on effectiveness and efficiency. Interviews with Commission and ERCEA staff, as well as with Steering Committee and ERC Scientific Council members, provided information not only on these matters, but also made it possible to address coherence criteria.

*Consultation activity for each evaluation criterion*

	Effectiveness	Efficiency	Coherence
Interviews with the European Commission	✓	✓	✓
Interviews with ERCEA representatives	✓	✓	✓
Interviews with ERCEA Steering Committee and ERC Scientific Council members	✓	✓	✓
Interviews with unsuccessful applicants, beneficiaries and experts	✓	✓	
Survey of beneficiaries and unsuccessful applicants	✓	✓	
Survey of external experts	✓	✓	

*Source: Study supporting the triennial evaluation of the Agency*

## 2. Key results of consultation activities

### 2.1. Summarised results of the survey

Two surveys were performed: survey A for applicants (beneficiaries and unsuccessful applicants), and survey B for external experts. The questions in both surveys aimed to ensure comparability across groups of respondents, as well as complementarity with the other evaluation methods used, including interviews. The surveys ran for around 2 weeks.

Survey A addressed individual recipients and their host institutions for the different types of grant based on applications for calls launched in 2018-2019-2020, and unsuccessful applicants and host institutions for the different types of grant based on applications for calls launched in 2018-2019-2020-2021. 450 replies were received from beneficiaries, 125 from the host institutions of principal investigators, 984 from unsuccessful applicants, and 442 from their host institutions. These represent a response rate of 18% for beneficiaries, 12.6% for the host institutions of principal investigators, 20.6% for unsuccessful applicants, and 10.9% for the host institutions of unsuccessful applicants. The overall response rate for survey A is 16.2%.

Survey B targeted all external experts during the evaluation period (based on the date on which a claim for costs was created). 603 replies were received, representing a response rate of 18.5%.

## Main statistics related to the implementation of the surveys

Target group	Full launch of the survey (majority of all invitations sent on this date)	Survey closure date	Population targeted/ no. of invitations sent out	No. of responses received	Response rate*	No. of responses included in the analysis after data cleaning
Survey A: principal investigators	29 November	12 December	2 507	Partial: 65	Total: 17.95%	Partial: 48
				Complete: 385	Only including complete: 15.36%	Complete: 385
				Total: 450		Total: 433
Survey A: host institutions of principal investigators			991	Partial: 46	Total: 12.61%	Partial: 14
				Complete: 79	Only including complete: 7.97%	Complete: 79
				Total: 125		Total: 93
Survey A: unsuccessful applicants			4 781	Partial: 202	Total: 20.58%	Partial: 125
				Complete: 782	Only including complete: 16.36%	Complete: 777
				Total: 984		Total: 902
Survey A: host institutions of unsuccessful applicants			4 054	Partial: 169	Total: 10.90%	Partial: 56
				Complete: 273	Only including complete: 6.73%	Complete: 268
				Total: 442		Total: 324
Total survey A			12 333	Partial: 482	Total: 16.22%	Partial: 243
				Complete: 1519	Only including complete: 12.32%	Complete: 1 509
				Total: 2001		Total: 1 752
Survey B: experts			3 261	Partial: 84	Total: 18.49%	Partial: 0
				Complete: 519	Only including complete: 15.92%	Complete: 511
				Total: 603		Total: 511

Note: formula-based response rate calculation:  $\text{response rate} = \frac{\text{No of responses received}}{\text{No of invitations sent out}} * 100\%$

Source: Study supporting the triennial evaluation of the Agency

The data gathered through the two surveys was analysed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. A summary of the findings from the survey data, grouped by the indicators set out in the evaluation framework, is presented below.

### Effectiveness

#### Quality of services provided by the ERCEA

The ERCEA's beneficiaries and unsuccessful applicants were (very) satisfied overall with the quality of the services provided by the ERCEA during the application and implementation period.

- On communication during the application phase, host institutions knew in particular who to contact with questions when preparing or submitting applications, and for the vast majority the time taken to respond to questions about the application or selection process was reasonable.

- On the user-friendliness of the application process, principal investigators, unsuccessful applicants and host institutions confirmed the clarity and user-friendliness of the information for applicants, the eform used for applications/submissions, and the IT tool used for the application process. Most respondents found it easy to access the application results.
- On the finalisation phase of the grant agreement, the vast majority of principal investigators and their host institutions felt that ERCEA staff assigned to the project during the grant finalisation and contract negotiation phase had been readily available and responsive and the contract easy to understand.
- Principal investigators and their host institutions expressed their overall satisfaction with the communication and information provided in the implementation phase.
- Any principal investigators who were subject to monitoring (checks or reviews of financial and/or technical aspects), in relation to their project, or to audits of their organisation after a project has ended, were satisfied on the whole with the monitoring and audits carried out.
- When applicants were asked if they would consider re-applying for an ERC grant, 94% out of the 370 principal investigators surveyed and 100% out of their 71 host institutions responded positively. The respective shares for unsuccessful applicants and their host institutions were 78% out of 751 applicants and 93% out of 237 host institutions.

Experts were also very satisfied with the quality of the services provided by the Agency during the process to register as an expert and when performing their expert duties.

- The vast majority of experts were satisfied with the ERCEA's performance in terms of managing the involvement of external experts in evaluation panels, ethics screening and monitoring and/or project monitoring and *ex post* assessment through peer reviews.
- Almost all experts were satisfied with the overall quality of the services provided by the ERCEA during the process to register as an ERCEA expert and/or when performing their external expert duties, as well as with the overall information provided by the ERCEA as they performed their tasks.
- On the ERCEA's facilities in Brussels during experts' visits, the survey revealed high satisfaction with the overall service provided at the reception desk, the overall logistics and infrastructure, IT tools, internet availability and assistance provided by IT staff, and the overall levels of assistance and responsiveness of ERCEA staff during visits to Brussels. 79% (301 out of 381) were satisfied with the practical information they got about hotels and transport in Brussels.
- 82% out of the 502 experts surveyed would definitely like to work again with the ERCEA as experts, and 15% (77 out of 502) said they would consider it ('maybe').

### **Quality of communication by the ERCEA**

Unsuccessful applicants and beneficiaries on the whole were satisfied with the various external communication channels, the accessibility and provision of information, and communication in general.

- In terms of overall performance, 86% of principal investigators (314 out of 364) and 97% of their host institutions (70 out of 72) expressed overall satisfaction with the ERCEA's communication and interaction throughout the application and project implementation period; 60% of unsuccessful applicants (379 out of 632) and 71% of their host institutions (150 out

of 212) were satisfied overall with the ERCEA's communication and interaction throughout the application period.

- As regards external communication on the application process, most respondents agreed that the overall application process had been clear and transparent (96% out of 400 principal investigators; 79% out of 824 unsuccessful applicants; 96% out of the 85 host institutions of principal investigators; 85% out of the 278 host institutions of unsuccessful applicants).
- During the implementation phase of the grant/project, principal investigators and host institutions were very satisfied with communication from/with the ERCEA: across all survey statements, more than 80% (286 out of 353) of principal investigators and more than 90% (62 out of 68) of their host institutions were satisfied with communication during the implementation phase. When asked about the communication channels used by the ERCEA during the grant/project and the extent to which these provided relevant and helpful information when needed, principal investigators and their host institutions indicated that email contact and the ERC website were their main sources of useful information.
- On the importance of different sets of factors related to communication when dealing with the ERCEA, all of the factors were considered important by more than 90% of the respondents, with the exception of the design and content of the ERCEA website and online communication tools (75% out of the 357 principal investigators and 77% out of their 73 host institutions) and the user-friendliness of IT tools used during project application/implementation (82%, or 295 out of the 358 principal investigators). Shares among unsuccessful applicants and their host institutions were generally lower, with more neutral responses.
- Principal investigators and their host institutions primarily regarded the knowledge and courtesy of ERCEA staff, the ERCEA's willingness to help and cooperate, and one-to-one contacts as relatively more important than unsuccessful applicants and their host institutions (between 94 and 98% compared to between 67 and 81%).

Experts were also satisfied with the various external communication channels, the accessibility and provision of information, and overall communication.

In terms of how frequently the experts received guidance from the ERCEA for assessing proposals/project reports or for performing other tasks, 70%, or 359 out of the 511 experts, indicated that they had received initial guidance before conducting the first assessment; 54% (276 out of 511) had almost always received guidance before they started to assess a proposal/project or perform other tasks; 45%, or 229 out of 511 experts, stated that ad hoc guidance had been provided on request; and 50% (256 out of 511) indicated that they had received continuous support throughout the project cycle.

Almost all experts (97 to 98%, or 493 out of 507) were positive about communication during the appointment process, i.e. from when the invitation was issued they had enough time to organise their schedule/work, and both the invitation letter and related explanations were clear. The usefulness of the information provided online was rated positively by experts, yet by far the most useful source for experts was direct support from ERCEA staff (96%, or 93 out of 97).

The vast majority of experts agreed that the information provided by the ERCEA during the registration/appointment process had been clear and easy to understand (86%, or 244 out of 285). The assistance provided by the ERCEA during the registration/appointment process was a notable strong point: 86% (219 out of 254) felt it was sufficient and helpful, and 96 to 97% (250 out of 258) rated the ERCEA staff with whom they communicated as responsive and qualified to assist them.

In general, there was strong agreement as regards the phase prior to the performance of their tasks (between 91 and 97% of experts). However, only 63%, or 153 out of 244 experts, agreed that the elearning modules had been an effective learning tool prior to attending the online briefings.

In terms of the evaluation/monitoring phase, 97%, or 481 out of 496 experts, agreed that they knew either who to contact or where to get help on any questions when working on their task; all respondents felt that the ERCEA staff with whom they worked were responsive (e.g. by email or phone); and 99% (482 out of 485) felt that the answers to their questions were useful.

### **Quality of feedback on the application/funding and evaluation/selection processes**

In terms of the processes related to the clarity and transparency of the evaluation/selection application processes, principal investigators and their host institutions strongly agreed (between 92 and 96%) that the process for selecting high-quality research for funding had been fair and transparent, that the individual reviews and panel comments provided had been useful, and that the overall evaluation process had been clear and transparent.

However, lower scores on the clarity and transparency of these processes were recorded among unsuccessful applicants and their host institutions. They agreed most strongly that the overall evaluation process had been clear and transparent (45% out of 817 unsuccessful applicants; 68% out of 258 host institutions of unsuccessful applicants), but only 36 to 40% of unsuccessful applicants and 59% of their host institutions agreed that the outcome of their application had been fair and that they had no complaints about it, and they had received clear explanations as to why the application had been turned down. The lowest scores related to the individual reviews and panel comments provided to help unsuccessful applicants improve and re-submit their proposals to another funding body (23% out of 269; 44% out of 178 respectively) or to the ERC (25% out of 694; 47% out of 183).

### **Addressing the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic**

Most respondents agreed that the Agency had reacted swiftly and flexibly to maintain the same level of service quality, that the transition from in-person to virtual activities had been managed smoothly by the Agency, and that – despite the suspension of in-person activities and events – effective information and advice from the ERCEA had reached the applicants and beneficiaries. Beneficiaries and experts were more inclined to agree with the statement (with shares of mostly 90%) than unsuccessful applicants and their host institutions (with shares of 55 to 59% and 77% respectively). Beneficiaries also agreed that the ERCEA had been flexible in adjusting/extending deadlines and agreeing to other project changes necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic (87% of principal investigators (228 out of 262) and 99% of their host institutions (63 out of 64)).

### ***Efficiency***

#### **Key performance indicators and payments**

83% (310 out of 375) of principal investigators and 85% (65 out of 75) of their host institutions felt that the timescale from the call deadline to the announcement of the outcome of the proposal (time-to-inform), from the announcement of the proposal's outcome to the signing of the contract (time-to-sign) and, overall, from the submission of the proposal to the signature of the grant agreement (time-to-grant) had been appropriate.

The overall payment process was rated as smooth by 93% of principal investigators (246 out of 266) and by 100% of their host institutions (55 out of 55). Principal investigators and their host institutions also strongly agreed that the Agency's deadlines for making pre-payments, processing payment requests and making payments, had been appropriate (91 to 92% of principal investigators; 100% of their host institutions). Similarly, experts strongly agreed that the Agency's time to process payment



requests or reimbursement requests and to make payments was satisfactory. However, experts agreed less that the remuneration received had been commensurate with the efforts involved (72%, or 366 out of 504) or that sufficient costs had been reimbursed (76%, or 303 out of 399). Remote referees who answered the survey of experts agreed that being asked to work for the ERC was prestigious (92%, or 457 out of 495) and that peer reviews were important in order to strengthen contributions to scientific improvements (97%, or 484 out of 497).

## **Granting process and project implementation**

Most principal investigators and their host institutions (between 80 and 97%) felt that the granting process and project implementation to date had been clear and transparent. In terms of ethics reviews and monitoring processes, between 64 and 78% agreed that these had gone smoothly.

On the grant/project agreement finalisation phase, principal investigators and their host institutions strongly agreed that ERCEA staff assigned to the project during the grant finalisation and contract negotiation phase had been readily available and responsive (89%, or 348 out of 394; 95%, or 75 out of 79), that the instructions included in the ERC invitation letter received at the beginning of the granting process had been clear (84%, or 342 out of 405; 90%, or 75 out of 83), and that the same was true of ERCEA requests on aspects such as changes to proposals and providing missing information (84%, or 327 out of 390; 94%, or 74 out of 79). Overall, 80% of principal investigators (321 out of 403) and 92% of their host institutions (75 out of 82) agreed that the granting process had been clear and transparent. Slightly fewer (but still around two thirds) of respondents agreed that the process of validating beneficiaries had gone smoothly and that the degree of effort required had been appropriate, that the electronic tools used for the validation and assessment of beneficiaries had been user-friendly, and that the contract had been easy to understand. Ultimately, 49% of principal investigators (183 out of 376) and 74% of their host institutions (61 out of 82) felt that the ERC granting process had been simpler and faster than that of other national and international funding bodies.

In terms of the ethics review process (guidance material, information requested, experts, etc.), principal investigators and their host institutions were less supportive of the statements in the survey, with between 59% and 79% in full agreement. The least supported statement was that the ethics review had facilitated compliance with ethical guidelines and (national, EU or international) legislation (59%, or 152 out of 259; 68%, or 37 out of 55). The most widely supported statement was that ERCEA staff and external experts assigned to the ethics review process had clarified what information should be provided (68%, or 184 out of 270; 79%, or 43 out of 54). Overall, 64% (173 out of 269) of principal investigators and 77% (45 out of 59) of their host institutions agreed that the ethics review process had gone smoothly.

Similarly, 65% of principal investigators (151 out of 234) and 78% of their host institutions (35 out of 45) agreed that the ethics monitoring process had gone smoothly. Between 65% and 82% also agreed with statements on guidance material and information requested and – most of all – with the statement that ERCEA staff and external experts assigned to the ethics monitoring process had clarified what information should be provided.

On the grant amendment process, most principal investigators with experience of one or more grant amendment processes agreed that the ERCEA staff assigned to the process had been readily available and responsive, that the time to process grant amendment requests had been appropriate, and that the information and advice provided by the Agency during the process had been clear. Overall, 84% of principal investigators (110 out of 131) agreed that the grant amendment process had gone smoothly.

On the scientific and financial monitoring and reporting processes, there was strong agreement (between 73% and 97% of respondents) with each of the statements on process clarity (73% of

principal investigators (253 out of 344) and 90% of their host institutions (55 out of 61)) and in terms of reporting instructions (73%, or 233 out of 320; 89%, or 54 out of 61), the positive impact of splitting financial and scientific reports (79%, or 261 out of 333; 83%, or 55 out of 66), and reasonable and consistent project reporting requirements (83% and 91%; 84% and 97%). Only 61% of the principal investigators (158 out of 261), but 88% of their host institutions (40 out of 45) felt that the monitoring activities carried out by ERCEA staff and external experts had been useful for the implementation of the grant/project. Overall, 85% of principal investigators (292 out of 344) and 97% of their host institutions (64 out of 66) felt that project implementation to date had gone smoothly.

Principal investigators with experience of monitoring (checks or reviews of financial and/or technical aspects) in relation to their project, or audits of their organisation after the project had ended, were surveyed on the follow-up checks as part of their organisations' grant/project and/or audit procedures. Although the number of observations was low, around 70 to 75% of principal investigators reported that the ERCEA staff and/or external experts assigned to the monitoring/audit procedure had clarified what information should be provided, that the scope of the information they had been asked to provide for monitoring/auditing had been reasonable, and that the overall monitoring/auditing process had gone smoothly.

### **Simplifications**

Results from the survey point to high levels of satisfaction among beneficiaries and unsuccessful applicants with the simplifications recently adopted by the Agency. Nonetheless, respondents also agreed that additional efforts to simplify procedures and requirements would be helpful.

On the other hand, many respondents did not express any firm views, which suggests that many respondents found the question difficult to assess. This also applies to the question on potential further simplifications.

Among principal investigators and their host institutions, most respondents agreed that the simplified reporting templates used to compile structured results had facilitated the project application/implementation process. Among unsuccessful applicants, the strongest agreement related to the use of simplified cost options instead of real-cost funding, which had facilitated the project application/implementation process. The host institutions of unsuccessful applicants most strongly agreed with the statement that the wider use of common IT tools across different programmes and programme strands had facilitated the project application/implementation process.

In respect of future simplifications, principal investigators and their host institutions most strongly agreed that more user-friendly IT tools for project management and reporting would enable better, more efficient programme implementation. Among unsuccessful applicants, three options received equal support: 1) the wider use of simplified cost options (lump sums, unit costs and flat rates) instead of real-cost funding would allow better, more efficient programme implementation; 2) it would be helpful to have more user-friendly IT tools for submitting applications; and 3) further simplification of the granting and reporting requirements would enable programmes to be implemented more effectively and more efficiently. The host institutions of unsuccessful applicants most strongly supported the statement that the further harmonisation of administrative requirements for projects financed under different programmes and actions would also allow better, more efficient programme implementation.

Compared with the answers to the statements on simplification, the host institutions had more diverse views on the use of simplified cost options (lump sums, unit costs and flat rates) instead of real-cost funding. Although most of the host institutions (69%, or 40 out of 58, of principal investigators and 74%, or 163 out of 221, of the host institutions of unsuccessful applicants) agreed that this had facilitated the project application/implementation process, 19% (11 out of 40) and 14% (29 out of

221) disagreed with the statement – the largest shares recorded across all the options. On whether wider use of simplified cost options (lump sums, unit costs and flat rates) instead of real-cost funding would enable better, more efficient programme implementation in the future, 59% of the host institutions of principal investigators (40 out of 68) and 73% of the host institutions of unsuccessful applicants (178 out of 243) supported this option with all other options falling in the range of 81 to 92%. At the same time, 25% of the host institutions of principal investigators (17 out of 68) and 13% of the host institutions of unsuccessful applicants (31 out of 243) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement.

### ***Coherence***

The survey results show very high general awareness among all groups that the ERC programme is funded from the EU budget: 99% of principal investigators (421 out of 426); 97% of unsuccessful applicants (860 out of 886); 100% of the host institutions of principal investigators (91 out of 91); 98% of the host institutions of unsuccessful applicants (303 out of 310); and 89% of experts (440 out of 497).

Most respondents were also aware (at the time of their application/invitation to register as an expert) that the ERCEA was entrusted by the Commission with managing the programme (between 54% and 86%). Host institutions of principal investigators (66%) showed reasonable awareness of the roles of the ERCEA, the ERC Scientific Council and the Commission. 88% of experts (446 out of 505) indicated that they were aware of the ERC’s remit. Overall, 87% of principal investigators (372 out of 426), 71% of unsuccessful applicants (619 out of 866), 86% of the host institutions of principal investigators (80 out of 93), 75% of the host institutions of unsuccessful applicants (232 out of 308) and 91% of external experts (448 out of 494) stated that the funding opportunities under the ERC programme had been promoted effectively.

### **2.2. Summarised results of the interview programme**

The interview programme encompassed scoping, main-phase and follow-up interviews with the representatives of the Commission, the ERCEA, the Steering Committee and the ERC Scientific Council, as well as with beneficiaries, unsuccessful applicants and external experts. The interview programme was designed to embrace a wide range of views, including from the Commission and the Agency as well as from other stakeholders.

The interviews were conducted according to a standardised questionnaire, including questions on the evaluation criteria that were adjusted to the experiences of individual stakeholders. At each interview, notes were compiled for further analysis. A total of 40 interviews – more than anticipated – were conducted. The interview phases and the participants are summarised in the table below.

The interview data fed into responses to the relevant evaluation questions, in particular the aspects of these questions where respondents’ opinions were of primary importance. All evidence from the interviews was incorporated into the evaluation’s final report. A summary of the findings from the interview data is presented below.

#### *General overview of the interview programme*

Interview phase	Target group	No. of completed interviews
Exploratory/scoping	Directorate-General for Research and Innovation	1 (with 3 interviewees)
	ERCEA	1 (with 2 interviewees)
Main phase	Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, including Steering Committee Chair and Vice-Chair	10 (with 11 interviewees)

	ERCEA	15 (with 19 interviewees)
	ERC Scientific Council	4
Follow-up	Directorate-General for Research and Innovation	1 (with 2 interviewees)
	Beneficiaries	2
	Unsuccessful applicants	2
	Experts	2
	ERCEA	2 (with 9 interviewees)
Total:		40 (with 56 interviewees)

Source: Study supporting the triennial evaluation of the Agency

## ***Effectiveness***

Interviews confirmed that ERCEA had achieved its objectives in implementing the ERC programme and its delegated tasks. Interviewees from the parent Directorate-General also confirmed high levels of satisfaction with the Agency’s performance and its interactions with the parent Directorate-General. The ERCEA had been excellent in terms of managing the programmes and grants, implementing calls in line with scheduled planning, and meeting its targets for key performance indicators. All interviewees from the parent Directorate-General and the ERC Scientific Council confirmed that the Agency had made a significant contribution to the implementation of the Horizon 2020 ‘Excellent Science’ pillar in the 2018-2021 period.

Interviewees also reported that the high levels of expertise and commitment on the part of Agency staff had been key in responding to the challenges faced during the evaluation period. All interviewees from the Agency, the ERC Scientific Council and the parent Directorate-General confirmed that the ERCEA had been highly adaptable and flexible, enabling it to maintain high performance standards. According to interviewees, the keywords summarising the Agency’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic were preparedness, sense of commitment, and crisis planning. In this context, several interviewees indicated that during the pandemic ERCEA staff had made additional efforts to simplify procedures and support beneficiaries. With regard to changes in ERC leadership, all interviewees agreed that this had not affected the Agency’s performance. Respondents cited the experience and commitment of Agency staff in ensuring that the HR team’s processes and support for the switch to remote working went smoothly while developing mechanisms to facilitate team communication and promote well-being.

Interviewees also confirmed that, during the evaluation period, the ERCEA had effectively provided high-quality and flexible technical support to the ERC Scientific Council. Interviewees indicated that the support provided by the ERCEA, in particular through units A1 and A2, to the ERC Scientific Council had been highly effective and professional as well as competent in technical and scientific terms. All ERC Scientific Council members involved in the interview programme were very satisfied with the quality and quantity of ERCEA support. Even during the pandemic, the support provided to the ERC Scientific Council was of high-quality and a key factor in the correct and prompt administration of the ERC Scientific Council’s work. Interviewees from the ERC Scientific Council stressed the fact that the Agency often provided the ERC Scientific Council with information both on request as well as spontaneously and that the Agency and the ERC Scientific Council collaborated flexibly on the basis of mutual understanding and trust. In this regard, interviewees from the ERCEA and the ERC Scientific Council emphasised the importance of the Agency’s communication unit in

providing tailored communication capable of building on expertise from the Agency's other departments<sup>27</sup>.

Interviews with the Agency confirmed three main risks to its effectiveness: potential cuts in the multiannual financial framework, in particular the consequence of a possible hard Brexit; the need to maintain respect for the ERCEA as the ERC's dedicated implementing structure and potential negative impacts on the Agency's flexibility and agility in responding to future programming priorities established by the ERC Scientific Council and in the quality of services delivered to the beneficiaries because of further imposed harmonisation.

In terms of contacting applicants and principal investigators, interviewees stressed that, in general, collective efforts had been made to improve the Agency's interaction with programme participants during the evaluation period (for instance, desk research directed at actions taken in response to the previous evaluation, such as raising awareness about grant management workshops for principal investigators, host institutions/principal investigator events and increasing the visibility of these events through national contact points, communication events and the ERC website<sup>28</sup>). Interviewees pointed out that the ERCEA had also been active in helping beneficiaries and internal staff to develop skills for effectively communicating results. For example, a communication coach was hired in the event where a beneficiary unfamiliar with communication techniques had to give a presentation on their research findings. Former journalists were hired to provide media training to improve communication effectiveness. Interviewees also mentioned that interactions with beneficiaries and unsuccessful applicants alike showed that they had been very satisfied with the Agency's services.

On the other hand, the feedback from some interviews suggested that, while communication on results and the efforts made to promote the ERC's visibility and its reputation for scientific excellence had been very effective, the involvement of the parent DG in some of the communication activities had been relatively limited.

### *Efficiency*

All interviewees recognised that the ERCEA had been able to implement efficiency guidelines and streamline its processes over the years. The Agency feels that past efficiency gains cannot be repeated to the same extent in the future; however, the 'Continuous Improvement' programme does make it possible to identify opportunities that remain in this regard.

In the area of IT, several interviewees indicated that a number of IT tools (e.g. Bluebell and Speedwell) developed and adopted by the Agency had helped to improve programme management in terms of simplifying procedures. Interviewees also confirmed that a number of technical simplifications applied during the evaluation period had reduced the pressures on both beneficiaries and Agency staff.

Overall, most interviewees confirmed that the IT tools had played a positive role in advancing process simplification. Corporate tools and internal developments alike were helpful in this regard. However, several interviewees suggested that the corporate tools needed to maintain sufficient flexibility to adapt efficiently to ERCEA specificities. Some matters needed to maintain direct, personal contact with beneficiaries. Although the use of IT tools was seen as helpful, as they reduced the overall

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<sup>27</sup> In 2021, the internal communication team within ERCEA was downsized and moved from the HR unit to Communication unit A2 in order to harness greater synergies between communication professionals (ERCEA, 2021 annual activity report).

<sup>28</sup> Action plan in response to prior evaluation, 7 December 2020. National contact points were set up across Europe by the national governments to provide information and personalised support to ERC applicants in their native language. Their mission was to raise awareness, inform and offer advice on ERC funding opportunities as well as support potential applicants in preparing, submitting and following up ERC grant applications.

administrative burden, more procedural simplification ran the risk of reducing the capacity to deal with any one-off demands from beneficiaries.

With regard to processes, several interviewees indicated that ERCEA staff had worked extra hard during the pandemic to simplify procedures and support beneficiaries, i.e. in relation to the amendment procedure. Interviewees also agreed that internal audits in general had been more than suitable and efficient and had always provided useful insights for improving processes.

Interviews with the Agency's HR staff also clarified several aspects in the HR strategy further. For instance, the main reason for the lower rate of occupancy for posts in 2021 was said to relate to intensive recruiting by new or expanding executive agencies, resulting in the higher turnover rate seen for the ERCEA and in more posts being filled by interim staff.

Interviews with Agency staff confirmed that the ERCEA had maintained appropriate staffing levels for the Agency's structure and appropriate flexibility to re-assign resources as dictated by workload fluctuations. It had also reacted promptly and effectively to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Several interviewees felt that the Agency's overall size and structure was appropriate, but others felt that specific departments should be consolidated.

Interviewees in the Agency and the ERC Scientific Council felt that the workload facing ERCEA staff was high and had increased over time. The COVID-19 pandemic had been a particularly challenging period because it became necessary to organise all interviews and evaluation panels remotely with people across different time zones. Several interviewees mentioned this as a time when assorted staff members had worked extra hard to manage these arrangements. It was also cited as an indication that ERCEA staff were motivated and dedicated in terms of ensuring that the Agency implemented high-quality grant management and evaluation processes. Alongside the greater number of proposals and running projects each year, interviewees cited other aspects behind this increase in workload: continuing to manage legacy projects in subsequent years; adapting to and customising processes to implement the corporate strategy; and – towards the end of the evaluation period – the implications of uncertainty as regards the UK and Switzerland (including ongoing evaluations for the UK).

Interviewees also pointed to limited career progression prospects, in particular for contract staff, as one of the causes of staff turnover. Interviewees also mentioned limited access for contract staff or temporary staff to management positions and barriers to mobility. At the same time, they reported that inter-agency mobility was an effective way to improve staff motivation and development.

Assorted interviewees felt that the recruitment process took too long and provided further explanations for this in relation to the availability of sufficiently filled reserve lists (with the relevant profiles) and the agility of the recruitment process when it came to screening CVs on the EPSO list.

### ***Coherence***

Interviews confirmed strong continuity in the Agency's programming responsibilities for implementing the ERC programme, as well as in the delegated tasks in terms of providing technical support to facilitate the work of the ERC's Scientific Council.

The finding in the previous evaluation on the harmonisation approach (namely that it provided benefits, but sufficient flexibility had to be maintained to customise tools and meet the specific needs and characteristics of the ERC programme) was confirmed by interviewees in the current reference period. Specific concerns were raised about how long it took Agency staff to engage in this process. Moreover, the balance between corporate harmonisation and the ERCEA's autonomy as the ERC

programme's 'dedicated implementation structure' and the provider of support to the ERC Scientific Council in all its tasks, was questioned in this context.

Overall, interviewees from both the parent Directorate-General and ERC Scientific Council stressed the importance of the quality and dedication of staff and highlighted the cooperation of staff working to support the Scientific Council and/or parent Directorate-General with staff from the scientific department to deepen analyses and inputs. According to the interviewees, this unique environment created significant added value with regard to the inputs provided by the ERCEA.

Interviewees also indicated that the ERCEA provided highly effective, relevant, strategic and high-quality feedback and inputs to inform the work of the ERC Scientific Council. Interviewees reported that the support from the ERCEA had been highly effective and professional as well as competent in technical and scientific terms. Even during the pandemic, the support provided to the ERC Scientific Council had been of high quality and a key factor in the work of the ERC Scientific Council being discharged correctly and promptly. Interviewees from the ERC Scientific Council stressed that the Agency often provided the ERC Scientific Council with information not only on request, but also spontaneously, and that the collaboration between the Agency and the ERC Scientific Council was a flexible one based on mutual understanding and trust.

Interviewees further recognised that the ERCEA provided sufficient and relevant information on the programme's operational implementation and that, in terms of supervision, the Commission's role in the Steering Committee allowed it to closely monitor the ERC programme's implementation. Interviewees from the ERC Scientific Council confirmed that the Agency was dedicated to promptly providing information and inputs to prepare and inform Steering Committee meetings as and when needed. The representatives of the parent Directorate-General would prefer to receive the inputs earlier prior to Steering Committee meetings to give them more time to prepare. To further support monitoring in the Steering Committee and via the annual activity report, interviewees reported that changing indicators over time to denote progress made towards achieving the objectives, and explaining/contextualising them, would be helpful.

Furthermore, interviews with representatives of the parent Directorate-General showed that communications on preparing and adopting processes (including with Directorate-General for Budget) had been cooperative and respectful. Finally, the interviews with ERC Scientific Council members also revealed how the ERCEA supported effective information flows between the Scientific Council, the parent Directorate-General and itself. Interviewees underlined that other regular thematic meetings on specific topics (business processes, IT tools, etc.) had maintained an effective loop for feedback between the ERCEA and the parent Directorate-General.

Several interviewees recognised the added value of seconding officials from the parent Directorate-General to the ERCEA to strengthen the ties between the two: seconded officials maintained personal links with both the Commission and the Agency, helping to improve mutual understanding.

### **2.3. Comparison of the results of consultation activities**

The table below presents key results for individual consultation activities, arranged according to evaluation criteria and the extent to which results were consistent, complementary or contradictory across the consultation activities. Overall, as summarised in the table below, there was a high degree of convergence in the findings from the different consultation activities.

*Key findings of the consultation activities*

Evaluation criterion	Survey	Interview programme	Consistent results across consultation activities	Complementary results across consultation activities	Contradictory results across consultation activities
Effectiveness	<p>Beneficiaries expressed high levels of satisfaction with the ERCEA’s performance throughout the project management process. External experts on the whole were satisfied with the services provided by the Agency when registering as experts and while performing their expert tasks. Most experts would like to work again with the ERCEA in the future.</p> <p>Most principal investigators and their host institutions rated the evaluation process as fair, transparent and clear. Unsuccessful applicants and their host institutions were less positive, particularly as regards the usefulness of feedback to help them improve and re-submit proposals to a different funding body. A significant proportion of beneficiaries would re-apply for an ERC grant.</p> <p>Most of the beneficiaries, unsuccessful applicants and external experts were satisfied with communication from the ERCEA and their interactions with the Agency. Most principal investigators and their host institutions rated the knowledge and courtesy of ERCEA staff, and the ERCEA’s willingness to help and cooperate as well as the individualised attention provided, as relatively more important than unsuccessful applicants and their host institutions. Experts considered direct support from ERCEA staff to be the most useful source during the appointment and registration process.</p> <p>Principal investigators and their host institutions agreed that the Agency had reacted swiftly and flexibly to address challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.</p>	<p>All interviewees confirmed that the ERCEA had achieved its objectives in implementing the ERC programme and its delegated tasks. Interviewees also confirmed that the ERCEA had provided the ERC Scientific Council with effective technical support.</p> <p>All interviewees confirmed the ERCEA’s high degree of adaptability and flexibility in responding to challenges, in particular those caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviewees cited the high level of expertise and commitment of Agency staff as key in this regard.</p> <p>The main risks for to effectiveness that are confirmed by interviewees from the Agency are related to the consequences of a possible hard Brexit, the need to continue respecting the set-up of ERCEA as a dedicated implementation structure for the ERC, and the potential negative impacts of further imposed harmonisation.</p> <p>Communication on results and the efforts to promote the ERC’s visibility and reputation for scientific excellence were rated as effective by interviewees, who also mentioned that collective efforts had been made to improve the Agency’s interaction with programme participants during the evaluation period and to support beneficiaries and internal staff in developing skills to communicate the results achieved effectively. On the other hand, feedback from some interviewees suggested that the involvement of the parent Directorate-General in communication activities could be improved further.</p>	High	High	Low
Efficiency	<p>Most principal investigators and their host institutions rated the processes implemented by the ERCEA as suitably prompt, the granting process and project implementation as clear and transparent, and the grant amendment and payment processes as smooth. A lower number, but still an overwhelming majority, agreed that the ethics review and monitoring processes had gone smoothly.</p> <p>Experts too agreed strongly that the payment processes were sufficiently prompt (albeit while being less convinced that the</p>	<p>All interviewees recognised that the ERCEA had successfully implemented efficiency guidelines and streamlined its processes over the years.</p> <p>Most interviewees confirmed that the IT tools – both corporate tools and internal developments – had played a positive role in simplifying procedures. Several interviewees from the Agency suggested that corporate tools had to maintain sufficient flexibility to adapt efficiently to ERCEA specificities.</p>	High	High	Low



	<p>payment received was commensurate with the efforts involved) and that costs were adequately reimbursed.</p> <p>Most of the beneficiaries and unsuccessful applicants surveyed were satisfied with the simplifications recently adopted by the Agency, but agreed that there was still room for further improvement, particularly in terms of making the IT tools more user-friendly. Unsuccessful applicants also cited future simplifications involving simplified cost options and granting and reporting requirements. The host institutions of unsuccessful applicants cited further harmonisation of administrative requirements for projects financed under different programmes and actions. The host institutions' views were more diverse on the use of simplified cost options (lump sums, unit costs and flat rates) instead of real-cost funding.</p>	<p>With regard to processes, interviewees indicated that during the pandemic ERCEA staff had worked extra hard to simplify procedures and support beneficiaries, i.e. in relation to the amendment procedure.</p> <p>Interviews with staff within the Agency confirmed that the ERCEA had maintained appropriate staffing levels for the organisation's structure and been flexible enough to re-assign resources as dictated by workload fluctuations. Interviewees within the Agency and the ERC Scientific Council felt that the workload facing ERCEA staff was high and had increased over time.</p> <p>Interviewees also cited limited career progression prospects, particularly for contract staff, as one of the causes of staff turnover.</p> <p>Further improvements to the availability of sufficiently filled reserve lists and to the process for screening CVs on the EPSO list were mentioned as opportunities to improve and shorten the recruitment process.</p>			
Coherence	<p>Survey results showed very high general awareness among all groups that the ERC programme is funded from the EU budget and that the ERCEA is entrusted with managing the programme. Most respondents found that the funding opportunities under the ERC programme were promoted effectively.</p> <p>The host institutions and experts were reasonably aware of the role of the ERCEA, the ERC Scientific Council and the Commission.</p>	<p>Interviewees confirmed strong continuity in the Agency's programming responsibilities for implementing the ERC programme and in its delegated tasks. While the harmonisation approach had brought benefits, sufficient flexibility needed to be preserved to customise tools to meet the specific characteristics of the ERC programme, as confirmed by interviewees during the current reference period.</p> <p>Interviewees from the ERC Scientific Council indicated that the ERCEA had been very effective in providing relevant, strategic and high-quality feedback and inputs to inform the work of the ERC Scientific Council. Interviewees from the representatives of the parent Directorate-General and the ERC Scientific Council recognised that the ERCEA had provided sufficient and relevant information on the operational implementation of the programme, but representatives from the parent Directorate-General would prefer to receive the inputs earlier prior to Steering Committee meetings and had suggested more reporting on contextualisation and changes to indicators over time.</p> <p>The interviews with ERC Scientific Council members indicated further that the ERCEA had supported effective information flows between the ERC Scientific Council, the parent Directorate-General and the ERCEA. Interviewees underlined that other regular thematic meetings on specific topics (business processes, IT tools, etc.) had maintained an effective loop for feedback between the ERCEA and the parent Directorate-General.</p> <p>Several interviewees recognised the added value of seconding officials from the parent Directorate-General in the ERCEA in terms of strengthening ties and improving mutual understanding.</p>	High	High	Low