EUROPEAN SCIENCE FOUNDATION

SETTING SCIENCE AGENDAS FOR EUROPE

EVALUATION REPORT

ESF Grant Application Procedures in Focus

Views and Experiences of Applicants

www.esf.org

The European Science Foundation (ESF) was established in 1974 to create a common European platform for cross-border cooperation in all aspects of scientific research.

With its emphasis on a multidisciplinary and pan-European approach, the Foundation provides the leadership necessary to open new frontiers in European science.

Its activities include providing science policy advice (Science Strategy); stimulating cooperation between researchers and organisations to explore new directions (Science Synergy); and the administration of externally funded programmes (Science Management). These take place in the following areas: Physical and engineering sciences; Medical sciences; Life, earth and environmental sciences; Humanities; Social sciences; Polar; Marine; Space; Radio astronomy frequencies; Nuclear physics.

Headquartered in Strasbourg with offices in Brussels, the ESF's membership comprises 75 national funding agencies, research performing agencies and academies from 30 European countries.

The Foundation's independence allows the ESF to objectively represent the priorities of all these members.

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Contents

ESF Grant Application Procedures in Focus

Views and Experiences of Applicants to ESF Exploratory Workshops and Research Networking Programmes

Explanations

Abbreviations used in the report

ESF: European Science Foundation

MO: ESF Member Organisation

EW: ESF Exploratory Workshop

RNP: ESF Research Networking Programme

Research fields: The research fields are defined according to the ESF Standing Committees which reviewed the research proposals:

EMRC: European Medical Research Councils

PESC: Physical and Engineering Sciences

LESC: Life, Earth and Environmental Sciences

SCSS: Social Sciences

SCH : Humanities

Country codes used in this report

AT	Austria	**IE**	Ireland
BE	Belgium	**IT**	Italy
BG	Bulgaria	**LT**	Lithuania
CH	Switzerland	**LU**	Luxembourg
CY	Cyprus	**NL**	Netherlands
CZ	Czech Republic	**NO**	Norway
DE	Germany	**PL**	Poland
DK	Denmark	**PT**	Portugal
EE	Estonia	**RO**	Romania
ES	Spain	**RU**	Russian Federation
FI	Finland	**SE**	Sweden
FR	France	**SI**	Slovenia
GR	Greece	**SK**	Slovak Republic
HR	Croatia	**TR**	Turkey
HU	Hungary	**UK**	United Kingdom

Country groups

EU-15: 15 EU Member States prior to enlargement in 2004

EU-NMS: 10 New Member States that joined in 2004 and 2006

EU-CC: Candidates Countries: HR, TR

EFTA: European Free Trade Association comprising all EU-15 plus CH and NO

To take into account the different number of respondents by country and for the purpose of meaningful statistical analysis and better data presentation, the report will use the following country classification:

(1) Countries with more than 20 respondents will be listed individually. Those countries, accounting together for 69% of all respondents are AT, BE, DE, ES, FR, IT, NL and UK.

(2) Other EU-15 and EFTA: (CH, DK, FI, GR, IE, LU, NO, PT, SE).

(3) EU-New Member States and Candidate Countries: BG, CY, CZ, EE, HR, HU, LT, PL, RO, SI, SK, TR.

Executive Summary

Study design and representivity

In October 2006, the European Science Foundation (ESF) commissioned the Gesellschaft für Empirische Studien (GES) to carry out a Survey on Applicants' Views on and Experiences with ESF Grant Application Procedures. The major objectives of the study were to assess the level of satisfaction of applicants with ESF operational procedures, the perceived quality and to compile from the applicants' answers suggestions as to how to improve those procedures.

The survey targeted applicants to ESF Exploratory Workshops and ESF Research Networking Programmes from the years 2005 and 2006. A return rate of 57% was achieved (474 replies out of 828 contacted). The sample includes 173 applicants to Research Networks Programmes and 301 to Exploratory Workshops.

Applicants from the field of Social Sciences account for 28% of the respondents and the Physical Sciences account for 25%. Life Sciences and Humanities have the same share of applicants (20%) whereas 9% come from the field of Medical Sciences.

A comparison of respondents with the total population of applicants invited to take part in the survey shows only marginal differences with respect to the type of ESF instrument, scientific area and country of residence relating to the work of the applicants. A relatively low participation by researchers whose proposals have not been funded was noted; however, it does not distort the validity of the sample which can be seen as fairly representative of the population it targeted.

Profile of applicants

At the time the proposals were submitted to ESF, respondents were, on average, 42 years old and in most cases established researchers (86%); i.e. scholars with five or more years research experiences after the award of their PhD. One in three applicants was a woman, however the proportion of females differs remarkably by scientific area. Almost all applicants were either employed at a university (79%) or at a publicly funded research institute (20%). About two thirds report to have no experience with ESF instruments but 20% have already been involved in Exploratory Workshops.

Sources of information on ESF instruments

The respondents report that their main source of information is the ESF website (45%) and colleagues in their own institutions and from abroad (41%). ESF leaflets, newsletters and advertisements in scientific journals play a relatively minor role. To a certain extent, national research organisations also contribute to the dissemination of information about ESF Calls for Proposals (about 26% of respondents got their information from this source).

Reasons for applying for an ESF grant and consideration of alternative funding sources

The main reason for applying for Research Networking Programmes was the range of activities supported by the scheme (82% of respondents) and the level of funding which is seen as adequate by two-thirds. The high reputation of ESF instruments is also an important factor (65%) and, to a lesser extent, the expectation of a good chance of being funded (for about 53% this is the main reason).

About 30% of applicants considered alternative sources of funding and slightly more than one in ten applied for funds elsewhere.

Assessment of information provided by the ESF website

Applicants are highly satisfied with the information provided on the ESF web page about the schemes they apply to. In their view the objectives of the schemes are clear and the guide-lines for submission of proposals well explained. They are also satisfied with information provided about the eligibility and about the scope of the schemes.

However, the applicants to Research Networking Programmes would like to have more information on the à la carte funding principle prior to application and about involvement of researchers from non-European countries in ESF-funded activities. One out of seven respondents wants more information about the procedures and criteria to be used in the assessment of applications.

Satisfaction with advice and support offered by the ESF Office via direct contact

About one quarter of applicants report that they had contact with the ESF Office during the application phase in order to get additional information (the proportion is higher among applicants to Research Network Programmes than among those who applied for Exploratory Workshops: 35% and 17% respectively).

Overall, those who had contact with the ESF Office report overwhelmingly that the ESF staff was friendly and its interaction customer-oriented. They are highly satisfied with the preciseness of information provided and the promptness with which their request was handled.

However, the accessibility of ESF staff members on the phone can be improved (only 75% of respondents say they are satisfied with this) as well as the process of finding the appropriate contact person within the ESF. In Research Networking Programmes 17% of applicants seem to have had difficulties finding the appropriate contact person. The reaction time to requests is also seen by almost a fifth of applicants as to be not very satisfactory.

Contact with national research organisations

About a third of applicants to Research Networking Programmes say that they have contacted their national research organisations to inform them about the proposals or to request more information about the application procedures and about the à la carte funding principle.

Assessment of the online tool

In the submission of the proposal, using the online proposal-submission tool, no major technical problems occurred. The applicants also had no difficulty in understanding the instructions on how to use the tool. Despite this generally positive result several suggestions were made by the applicants to improve the existing system. The slight decrease in the number of those who report problems between 2005 and 2006 suggests that some improvements have already been made.

Burden of preparing and submitting the proposal

Respondents are divided on whether a standardised application form would simplify the preparation and submission of proposals; 40% say that they do not know. Among applicants to Exploratory Workshops 35% say that a standardised form would be an improvement. The same portion among the applicants to Research Networking Programmes takes the opposite view.

Asked to compare the overall burden of preparing and submitting a proposal for an ESF grant with the burden of applying to relatively similar schemes, the majority of respondents say that it is more or less the same (51%) and a quarter say that the burden is less. Remarkably, 10% of applicants to Research Networking Programmes think that the burden of making a grant application is greater in relation to ESF than in similar schemes while the corresponding portion among applicants to Exploratory Workshops is 18%.

Assessment of the duration of the main phases from application to final decision

The duration between the launch and the closing of the Call for Proposals is seen as appropriate by the vast majority of the respondents. However, opinions are divided on the duration of the proposal's assessment. About half of the respondents say that

the time between submission of the proposal and information about the outcome is too long. Among those who applied for Exploratory Workshops about half see the time as appropriate, whereas among those who applied for Research Networking Programmes only 40% held the same view. Among applicants to this scheme a third of respondents estimate that the time between information on the outcome of the assessment and the final decision (subject to the financial endorsement by the ESF Member Organisations) is too long.

Assessment of proposal assessment and selection mechanisms

Overall, the quality and the usefulness of the summaries of the assessment reports provided by ESF were judged critically by a large number of ESF applicants. Only slightly more than half of the respondents expressed their satisfaction with the scientific quality of the assess-ment by independent reviewers. The transparency of reasons for the recommendation on funding were judged positive by only 42% and only 39% considered the assessment report as useful for the improvement of future proposals. Least satisfaction was expressed by rejected applicants to Exploratory Workshops. They most often complained that their proposal had got excellent grades from the reviewers but that in the end it was not funded with no reasonable explanation being given.

Overall assessment

Despite some critical comments on the assessment and selection of proposals, the majority of respondents could imagine applying again for an ESF grant. While almost all successful applicants shared this view, about one third of the rejected applicants seem to be lost as future customers of ESF funding instruments.

Suggested improvements

Respondents made a large number of recommendations on how the procedures could be improved. They are included in this report at the chapter 5 and chapter 6. The range of issues addressed by these suggestions covers the dissemination of the Calls for Proposals, the information provided on the ESF instruments, the submission tools and the selection process. Concerning this particular issue, the respondents generously shared their views on a range of aspects such as the criteria for selection of proposals, the rules for selecting the referees, the mechanisms for the clarification of disputes between referees, the information about the final outcome of the assessment process, the duration of the assessment process and the possibility of resubmitting a proposal. It is highly recommended that ESF considers those suggestions carefully and clarify how they can contribute to the improvement of existing procedures.

1. Introduction

1.1 Rationale and scope of the study

The European Science Foundation (ESF) provides a forum for its Member Organisations (MOs) to develop joint activities aiming at, among other things, stimulating cooperation between researchers. The ESF instruments intended to further this aim bring researchers together to address common research questions, to explore new directions in research fields and to work out research agendas and pave the way for future collaboration.

The ESF issues Calls for Proposals for those activities which are science driven and funded in a responsive mode (ESF MOs on an à la carte funding principle).

The ESF Strategic Plan 2006-2010 stresses the importance of quality assurance and the role of periodic reviews of ESF procedures from a client perspective in order to see if there is room for simplification and streamlining. This exercise will be periodically undertaken to record changes and trends in the way ESF meets the expectations of its clients.

The study built on previously conducted studies by ESF.

In the Analysis of the Impact of ESF Instruments conducted by Technopolis (published in July 2005) a part of the questionnaire targeted the programme's participants as well as un-successful applicants and addressed the issue of management and administration.

A survey on the effectiveness of ESF instruments conducted in July/August 2005 by the ESF Office included some questions related to the level of overall satisfaction with the management of the ESF instruments.

The present survey was distinctive in one major aspect. While the above-mentioned surveys focused on the impact of the instruments and their effectiveness and dealt only marginally with the views on procedures of ESF, this survey purposely put the focus on views and experiences of applicants. It also sought to systematically collect applicants' suggestions for improvement.

The ESF instrument portfolio has changed over the years to match the expectations of the Member Organisations and to react (sometimes proactively) to changes in the European funding landscape. The fact that the procedures for each ESF instrument have changed throughout the last years – some substantially – requires a careful choice of the ESF instrument and the period to be considered in the survey.

Two ESF instruments were covered by the survey: The ESF Exploratory Workshops and the ESF Research Networking Programmes. Other ESF instruments were not considered for a variety of reasons:

- *the ESF Scientific Network Programme* which was discontinued following a decision of the ESF Governing Council in 2004.
- *the Forward Look Scheme* whose implementation guidelines were being substantially modified at the time the survey was planned.
- *The Research Conferences Scheme,* which emerged out of the discontinued EURESCO Programme, started in 2005.
- *The EUROCORES Scheme* was undergoing a review by a dedicated panel. The review included a survey of applicants as well[1].

In October 2006, following a competitive bid, the European Science Foundation contracted the Gesellschaft für Empirische Studien (GES) to carry out a Survey on Applicants' Views on and Experiences with ESF Grant Application Procedures. The aims of the survey were three-fold:

– to measure the satisfaction level of the applicants with ESF operational procedures,
– to assess the perceived quality of those procedures,
– to get systematic feedback on how to improve them.

[1] Meanwhile the report of the panel has been published and is accessible on the ESF homepage www.esf.org

1.2 ESF Exploratory Workshops and Research Networking Programmes

In the following we provide concise information on the two ESF instruments covered by the study. The brief descriptions are to guide the reader of the report in assessing the results reported in the subsequent chapters. More detailed information on the instruments, their aims and procedures can be found on the ESF website.

ESF Exploratory Workshops
Each year the European Science Foundation supports approximately 50 Exploratory Workshops across all scientific domains as described in the Call for Proposals 2006.

'The focus of the scheme is on projects aiming to open up new directions in research or to explore emerging research fields with potential impact on new developments in science.'

After positive experiences with some pilot workshops in 1998 and 1999, ESF moved to 'mainstreaming' Exploratory Workshops across the whole organisation in 2000. Exploratory Workshops aim to initiate follow-up research activities, collaborative actions or specific outputs within or outside the frame of ESF. Wide participation of scientists from across Europe is a condition of getting funding for an Exploratory Workshop. The maximum grant is €15K which can be used for covering the costs of workshop activities as well as those for travel, accommodation and subsistence of participants.

Annually, one Call for Proposals for Exploratory Workshops is launched by ESF. It closes at the beginning of May. Applicants must be scientists or scholars from European universities or research institutes in countries in which at least one organisation is an ESF Member Organisation. Co-applicants or participants from other countries should usually ensure their funding through national agencies or funding bodies of their own country.

Proposers can nominate up to three referees and they can also point out people who would be unsuitable; e.g. because of a conflict of interest. ESF considers these nominations in its selection of reviewers, whose reports are considered by the relevant Standing Committees (or appropriate sub-groups thereof) of ESF in October. The main criterion for the assessment is whether the proposed workshop will explore new directions in research or emerging research fields with potential impact on new developments in science. Other criteria are:
– benefits of a collaborative European approach/ a European-scale event,
– potential for initiating follow-up research activities and/or developing future collaborative actions within or outside the framework of ESF,
– Suitability of the principal applicant(s) to convene the workshop.

Successful applicants are notified by the end of November/beginning of December, and the workshop normally takes place over 1 to 3 days during the following year.

ESF Research Networking Programmes
With the help of the Research Networking Programmes the European Science Foundation intends to bring together nationally funded research activities to address major scientific issues or science-driven topics of research infrastructure at the European level and which aim at advancing frontier sciences[2]. The first Call for Proposals was launched in 2005. Key objectives of the ESF Research Networking Programmes are:
– creating interdisciplinary fora,
– sharing knowledge and expertise,
– developing new techniques,
– training young scientists.

A Research Networking Programme should last from four to five years and the annual budget should not exceed €120K.

Annually, one Call for Proposals with a deadline by end of October is launched by ESF. Similar to Exploratory Workshops, proposals for Research Networking Programmes can be submitted only by researchers from countries having agencies that are ESF Member Organisations while co-proposers and participants from other countries have to cover their costs from their own sources.

[2] See ESF Research Networking Programmes. 2006 Call for Proposals.

1. Introduction

Proposers for Research Networking Programmes can also nominate up to three referees and point out people who would be unsuitable because of a possible conflict of interest.

In comparison with Exploratory Workshops, the funding of Research Networking Programmes is completely different. While the former are supported by the ESF General Budget, the latter are funded individually by the Member Organisations. The role of ESF is to collect and assess proposals and to make recommendations to Member Organisations. Individual Member Organisations then decide on a case-by-case basis whether to fund a portion of the budget (à la carte principle). The amount of ESF Member Organisations' contributions is based on the level of their contributions to the ESF General Budget and their national GDP per capita.

Because of the different stages of assessment of proposals – first by referees , then by an ESF Standing Committee and, finally, by the national Member Organisations – the duration between submission of the proposal and final decision usually takes at least one year, this means that approved programmes applied for in 2006 can be launched in 2008.

2. Design of the study

2.1 Sampling

The study targeted scientists from all ESF countries who applied in the years 2005 and 2006 for support either for an Exploratory Workshop or for a Research Networking Programme. Applications are submitted by several scientists, generally from different countries. The applications and contact details of applicants are recorded on an internal database, which forms the basis for sampling.

For 2005 and 2006, ESF has received 553 applications for Exploratory Workshops. For this instrument only 'main applicants' (i.e. researchers who acted as the contact person between the ESF Office and their co-applicants) were targeted by the survey. For the ESF Research Networking Programmes a total of 228 applications were received in 2005 and 2006 involving 312 applicants and co-applicants who were included in the target population. Because some scientists applied for both ESF instruments, it was necessary to assign the scientists to only one instrument to avoid having them filling in two questionnaires. They were assigned to the Research Networking Programmes. The final sample was made up of 825 scientists: 299 were asked about their experiences as applicants to ESF Research Networking Programmes and 526 as applicants to ESF Exploratory Workshops.

2.2 Data collection

Separate questionnaires were used for each of the two ESF instruments. Initial drafts of the questionnaire were developed by a working group at the ESF Office and were included in the documents inviting tenders.

On the basis of those drafts and in close collaboration with the ESF Office GES developed the final questionnaires which are reproduced in Appendices 1 and 2.

The two questionnaires, although taking into account the particularities of each ESF instrument under study, are largely homogeneous to allow comparisons on aspects of relevance for both the Exploratory Workshops and the Research Networking Programmes.

Both questionnaires were divided in four sections and contained about 25 questions each. In the first part respondents were asked from which sources they had learned about the Call for Proposals; what were the main reasons for applying for this particular programme and if they had explored alternative funding sources. The second part of the questionnaire dealt with the procedural guidelines issued by ESF and the process of submitting a proposal. The perception of the selection procedures was covered by the third part of the questionnaire while the fourth part collected socio-biographic details of the respondents to allow a more differentiated analysis of the responses.

The questions were mostly multiple choice or provided a rating scale and at the end of most sections an open question was introduced to allow respondents to add their opinions, comments and further remarks in their own words.

The questionnaires were made available in two formats: First as a paper version and second as an online questionnaire which could be filled in via the Internet by using standard browsers; e.g. Microsoft Explorer or Firefox. The paper version of the questionnaire was provided in a format which allows the automated recording of data to minimise efforts of data capture while maintaining a high accuracy of data ultimately entered in the database.

The mix-mode approach of a paper as well as online questionnaires was chosen to ensure a high response rate.

The data collection was undertaken in the three steps described in Box 1 (see p. 12).

2. Design of the study

Box 1: Field phase

Step 1: An initial package of documents was sent to all applicants in the target population in the first week of January 2007. It included:
– an introductory letter from the ESF Office explaining the purpose of the study and inviting the scientists and scholars to take part in the survey,
– the paper version of the questionnaire,
– a letter of instruction providing, among other things, information about the web address and the user access code for the online version of the questionnaire,
– an envelope with the address of GES which could be used to return the paper questionnaire by postal mail.

Step 2: On 1 February 2007 reminders were sent electronically by e-mail to about 670 applicants (81% of the total sample of applicants) who had not responded to the survey by 31 January 2007.

Step 3: A second reminder was sent via e-mail on 12 February 2007 to 466 non-respondents (56%).

After the deadline of the field phase on 23 February 2007 a total number of 474 applicants had participated in the survey by filling in the paper questionnaire (18% of the respondents) or by responding to the online questionnaire (82% of the respondents). The relatively high return rate of 57.5% shows scientists' high interest in and appreciation of the work of the European Science Foundation and their willingness to contribute to the improvement of operational procedures.

2.3 Description of the sample and assessment of the representativeness

In order to assess the representativeness of the realised sample a systematic comparison was made between the total population under study (the initially targeted sample of 825 researchers) and the realised sample on which this study is based (351 respondents). Comparisons were, first, made in respect of the type of ESF instrument, year of application, field of study and country of applicant. Because in most similar surveys applicants whose applications were rejected tend not to participate, it was also assessed whether this could be a source of serious bias in the data.

The comparisons between the target population and the sample in relation to the type of instrument, year of application, and scientific field are depicted in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1
Comparison between the target population and the realised sample

	Target population		Sample	
	Count	%	Count	%
Type of ESF instrument				
Exploratory Workshops	526	63.8	301	63.5
Research Networking Programmes	299	36.2	173	36.5
Year of application				
2005	470	57.0	232	48.9
2006	355	43.0	242	51.1
Scientific field				
Multidisciplinary	207	25.1	108	22.8
Social Sciences	185	22.4	107	22.6
Humanities	115	13.9	68	14.3
Physical and Engineering Sciences	160	19.4	92	19.4
Life, Earth and Environmental Sciences	109	13.2	71	15.0
Biomedical Sciences	49	5.9	28	5.9
Country of applicant				
United Kingdom	152	18.4	79	16.7
Germany	99	12.0	55	11.6
Italy	91	11.0	58	12.2
France	64	7.8	31	6.5
Netherlands	51	6.2	31	6.5
Spain	45	5.5	27	5.7
Belgium	43	5.2	26	5.5
Austria	33	4.0	21	4.4
Other EU-15/EFTA	157	19.0	91	19.2
EU-NMS and EU-CC	88	10.7	55	11.6
Other	2	0.2	0	0.0
Total	**825**	**100.0**	**474**	**100.0**

Source: ESF database and questionnaire survey
Missing cases: 0

2. Design of the study

With respect to the type of ESF instrument no difference in the participation rate for both groups could be observed. Applicants to both instruments took part equally in the survey. Both in the target population and in the sample, applicants to Exploratory Workshops account for 64% and applicants to Research Networking Programmes account for 34%.

Looking at the year of application the data show that respondents of the 2006 cohort were overrepresented as compared with the total population of applicants (51% as compared with.43%). This difference cannot solely be explained by a decrease in the interest of applicants in ESF or by difficulties in remembering the different steps of the application because a long time had elapsed since the submission of the proposal. The most important reason for the lower participation of the 2005 cohort in the survey seems to be the clear correspondence between a positive approval and funding of the project and the willingness to take part in the study (see dedicated section below).

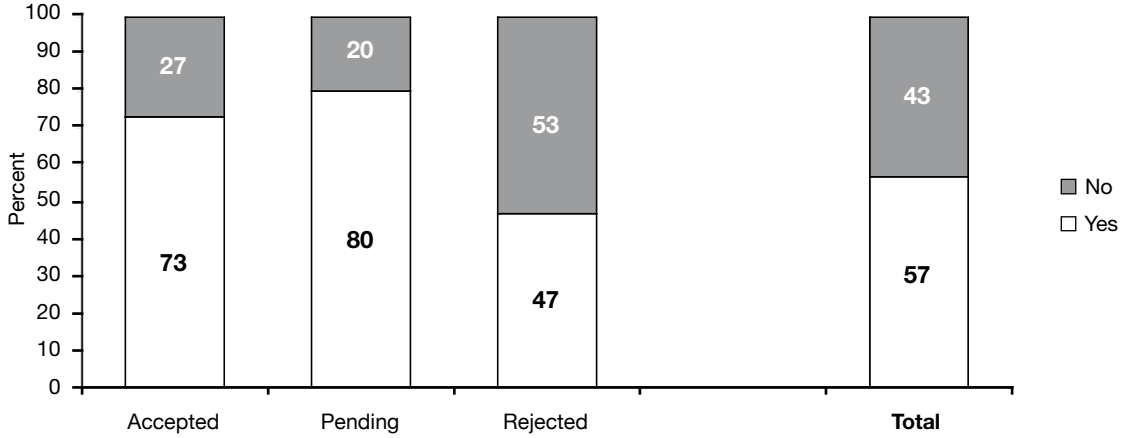
Considering the scientific field in which the proposals were allocated the percentage of re-spondents to the survey did not differ significantly from the total population of applicants. In both groups about one in four proposals was either classified as multidisciplinary (i.e. reviewed by more than one ESF Standing Committee) or allocated to the Social Sciences. One in five proposals was reviewed by the Standing Committee of Physical and Engineering Sci-ences, one in seven by the Standing Committee for Humanities. The share of proposals in the area of Biomedical Sciences accounts for 6% in the target and realised sample.

Scientists from all European countries represented by ESF Member Organisations had applied for Research Networking Programmes or Exploratory Workshops in 2005 or in 2006. Table 2.1 shows no noticeable differences in their participation rates. The largest group are UK-based researchers who account for 18% in the target sample and for 21% in the realised sample. Germany-based researchers make up 12% of the initial sample and account for 13% in the realised sample. The corresponding figures for Italy and France are 11% versus 9% and 8% versus 9% respectively. The shares of researchers from EU-NMS and EU-CC in the target population and in the realised sample do not differ greatly (11 and 9% respectively).

Final decision about the proposal

Overall, 18% of the proposals had been accepted for funding at the time the survey was conducted, 18% were pending and 64% had been rejected. All applicants in the year 2005 had been informed about the final decision concerning their projects (19% of Research Networking Programmes were funded and 21% of Exploratory Workshops), and all applicants to Exploratory Workshops in the year 2006 (29% were accepted). However, decisions on al-most all proposals for ESF Research Networking Programmes of the year 2006 were still pending.

Chart 2.1
Participation in the survey – by final decision about the proposal (percentages)



Source: ESF database and questionnaire survey
Missing cases: 0

The correspondence between the (potentially) positive assessment of the proposal and the participation in the survey is documented in Chart 2.1. While about three quarters of successful applicants and slightly more applicants with decisions pending took part in the study, the respective proportion is less than half in the case of rejected proposals (only 47%). As a consequence of the different participation rates the sampling error is likely to be greater for the group of applicants whose applications were rejected than for the group of respondents whose applications were either accepted or is still in the selection process. This is a problem which is inherent to all surveys with similar target groups. The lower participation of applicants whose proposals were rejected has to be kept in mind when assessing the results. It does not, however, compromise the validity of the sample.

Overall, weighing the representativeness of other aspects considered above, the realised sample can be assumed to be fairly representative of the target group addressed by the study.

3. Profile of the applicants

The questionnaires included a section on personal background information which, on the one hand, allowed a detailed description of applicants and, on the other, a differentiated analysis of the impact of applicants' personal characteristics on the assessment of application and selection procedures in both ESF instruments.

Age and stage of research career
On average, ESF applicants were 42 years old at the time they applied for ESF Exploratory Workshops or Research Networking Programmes. Only 16% were younger than 36 years, two thirds were between 36 and 55 years old and 18% were 56 years and older. Table 3.1 shows that scientists applying for Exploratory Workshops were on average six years younger than their colleagues submitting a proposal for Research Networking Programmes. This age gap is arguably because of the inherent characteristics of the instruments in that it can be thought that mobilising a number of outstanding scientists to apply for an ESF Research Networking Programme requires a certain standing in the scientific community and a greater research experience than is required for application to an Exploratory Workshop.

The main target group of both ESF instruments considered in this study are clearly 'established researchers'; i.e. scholars with five or more years of research experiences after the award of their PhD. They account for 87% of applicants. Earlier stage researchers (i.e. those with up to five years of research experience after PhD) account for 11% while doctoral can-didates account for 3%.

The figures presented in Table 3.2 strengthen the previously mentioned fact that ESF Exploratory Workshop schemes seem to be more attractive to younger researchers in the early stage of their career than Research Networking Programmes are.

Gender of respondents
About two thirds of ESF applicants were male and one third female. The lowest proportion of females (17%) could be observed in Physical and Engineering Sciences (see Chart 3.1) while the respective proportion is highest in Humanities (42%) and in Social Sciences (36%).

Table 3.1
Age of applicants in the year of submission of proposal – by ESF instrument (percentages)

	Research Networking Programmes	Exploratory Workshops	Total
Up to 35 years	13	17	16
36-45 years	41	35	37
46-55 years	30	28	29
56 years and older	16	19	18
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**
Count (n)	**(166)**	**(289)**	**(455)**
Average in the year of application	**45.5**	**39.4**	**41.6**

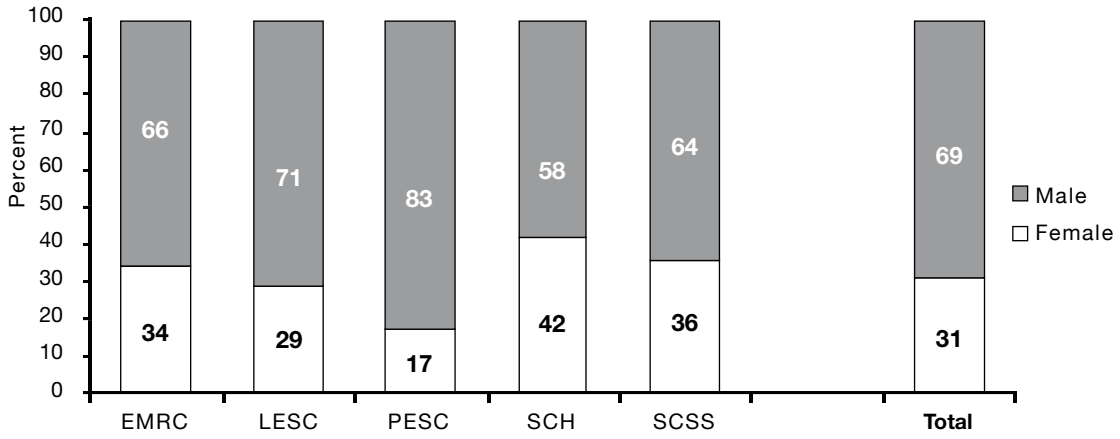
Question: Year of birth:
Missing cases: 19

Table 3.2
Stage of research career of applicants – by ESF instrument (percentages)

	Research Networking Programmes	Exploratory Workshops	Total
Doctoral candidate	2	3	3
Early stage researcher	8	12	10
Established researcher	90	85	87
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**
Count (n)	**(173)**	**(299)**	**(472)**

Question: At which stage of your research career are you currently?
Missing cases: 2

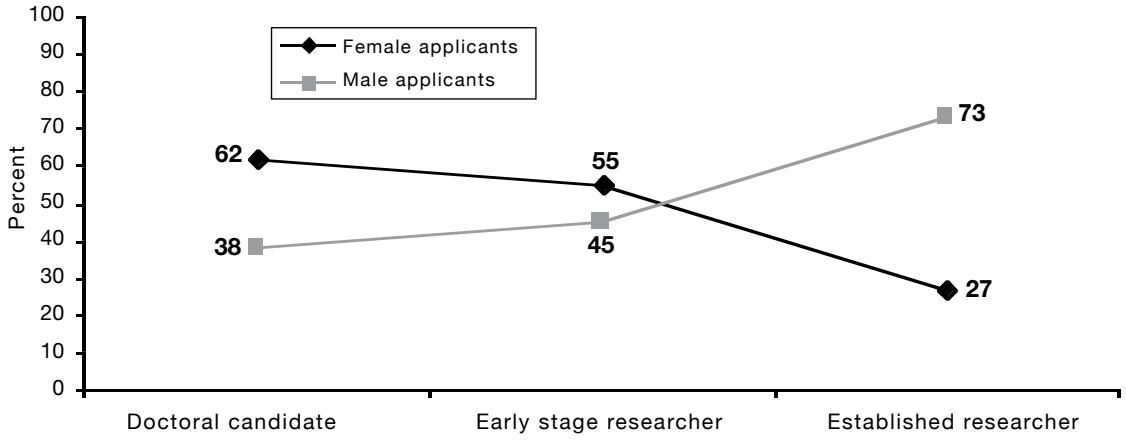
Chart 3.1
Gender of applicants – by scientific area (percentages)



Question: Gender:
Missing cases: 0
Scientific areas: EMRC: Medical Sciences; LESC: Life, Earth and Environmental Sciences; PESC: Physical and Engineering Sciences, SCH: Humanities; SCSS: Social Sciences.

3. Profile of the applicants

Chart 3.2
Gender of applicants – by stage of research career (percentages)



Question: Gender:
Missing cases: 2

Chart 3.2 clearly shows the well-known pattern of the 'gender scissors'. While women account for almost two thirds of applicants among doctoral candidates, their share declines with each step on the career ladder and accounts for only one quarter among applicants who are 'established researchers'.

Organisation of employment
Almost all applicants to ESF Research Networking Programmes or Exploratory Workshops were either employed at a university (79%) or at a publicly funded research institute (20%). Only 1% was from the private sector, e.g. business and industry.

Scientists from research institutes not directly linked to a university were most frequent among applicants from France (39%), Germany (29%) and Italy (28%) while the respective proportion was only about 10% or less in case of the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Spain and Belgium.

Prior involvement in ESF instruments
One in three of the respondents already had experience of the application and selection mechanisms of ESF based on prior involvement in successful or unsuccessful applications. In more detail, one in five of the respondents stated prior experiences with applications for Exploratory Workshops, one in seven with Networks or ESF Research Networking Programmes. A small number also reported on submissions of proposals in the EUROCORES Scheme (6%) or for ESF Research Conferences (6%).

It is no surprise that established researchers were familiar with ESF instruments more often than scientist in the early stage of their research career or doctoral candidates (see Table 3.3).

Table 3.3
Prior involvement in ESF instruments – by stage of career (percentages, multiple replies possible)

	Doctoral candidate	Early stage researcher	Established researcher	Total
No prior involvement with ESF instruments	92	82	62	65
Prior involvement with				
Exploratory Workshops	8	12	21	19
Networks	0	2	9	8
ESF Research Networking Programmes	0	6	5	5
EUROCORES Scheme	0	2	7	6
ESF Research Conferences	0	0	7	6
Other	0	0	4	3
Total	**100**	**104**	**114**	**112**
Count (n)	**(13)**	**(49)**	**(401)**	**(463)**

Question: Have you been involved in any of the ESF instruments, including successful or unsuccessful applica-tions, prior to the application to ESF Research Networking Programmes/Exploratory Workshops in 2005 or 2006?
Missing cases: 11

4. Applying for an ESF grant

4.1 Sources of information about ESF instruments

ESF uses different channels to disseminate information about its activities and to disseminate the Call for Proposals. Scientists were asked to state how they had learned about the Call for Proposals for the instrument they applied for.

Two major channels of information about the ESF instruments were most frequently mentioned by ESF applicants from the years 2005 and 2006: first, the website of the European Science Foundation and second, colleagues from their own or from other institutions (equally 45%). National research organisations played a relatively modest role in marketing ESF funding opportunities. Only 13% of the scientists say that they learned about the ESF instruments through an officer of a research organisation from their own country or from the website of a respective organisation. It seems that the special activities undertaken by ESF to advertise the Call for Proposals for Research Networking Programmes or for Exploratory Workshops were also seen by only a small minority of applicants: 6% were informed by the ESF leaflet of the Call for Proposals and 3% by advertisements in journals such as *Nature, Lancet, Research Europe* and *The Times Literary Supplement*.

Applicants to Research Networking Programmes were more often informed by colleagues from other institutions (13% as compared with 5% of applicants to Exploratory Workshops) and less often by colleagues from their own institutions (30% as compared with 40%) than applicants to Exploratory Workshops. With respect to all other potential sources of information no substantial differences between the two groups of scientists could be observed (see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1
Sources of information about the instrument – by ESF instrument (percentages, multiple replies possible)

	Research Networking Programmes	Exploratory Workshops	Total
From the ESF website	42	46	45
From a colleague/staff member at my institution	30	40	37
Colleagues from other institutions	13	5	8
From the Internet site of a research organisation of my own country	12	14	13
Directly from officers of national research organisations	10	15	13
ESF Leaflet on Call for Proposals	7	5	6
Prior contacts with ESF/ESF newsletter	5	3	4
Advertisement of the Call for Proposals in scientific journals, e.g. *Nature* or *Lancet*	2	3	3
Other	2	0	1
Total	**123**	**132**	**129**
Count (n)	**(172)**	**(299)**	**(471)**

Question: How did you learn about the ESF Research Networking Programmes/Exploratory Workshops?
Missing cases: 3

Table 4.2
Sources of information about the instrument – by prior involvement in ESF instrument
(percentages, multiple replies possible)

	No	Yes	Total
From the Internet site of a research organisation of my own country	13	13	13
From the ESF website	40	53	45
Directly from officers of national research organisations	15	9	13
From a colleague/staff member at my institution	41	30	37
ESF Leaflet on Call for Proposals	5	9	6
Advertisement of the Call for Proposals in scientific journals, e.g. *Nature* or *Lancet*	3	2	3
Colleagues from other institutions	7	9	8
Prior contacts with ESF/ESF newsletter	2	7	4
Other	1	1	1
Total	**127**	**133**	**129**
Count (n)	**(300)**	**(164)**	**(464)**

Question: How did you learn about the ESF Research Networking Programmes/Exploratory Workshops?
Missing cases: 10

Some differences in the importance of various channels of information become visible with respect to the personal and regional background of applicants:

– *Prior involvement in ESF instruments:* Scientists who were already familiar with ESF be-cause of prior experiences are likely to use the ESF website or other ESF material to inform themselves about new Calls for Proposals (see Table 4.2). Information provided by colleagues, however, became less important.
– *Stage of research career:* Scientists at an early stage of their research career more often depended on information from colleagues at their own institution (55% as compared with 34% of experienced researchers) while experienced researchers more often made use of the ESF website (46% as compared with 39%) or were informed directly by an officer from a national research organisation (14% as compared with 6%).
– *Scientific area:* The advertisement of Calls of Proposals in scientific journals was seen only by scientists from the hard sciences, i.e. Medical Sciences (9%), Life, Earth and Environmental Sciences (6%) and Physical and Engineering Sciences (2%). Taking into account that the two journals in which the advertisements were published are *Nature* and *Lancet* it is no surprise that scientists from the Humanities and from the Social Sciences did not usually see the advertisements.
– *Country of work:* The role of national research organisations as 'multipliers' of information about the ESF instruments differs, to a certain extent, by country (see Table 4.3). While one fifth or more of the ESF applicants from Austria, Belgium and from the new EU member and candidate states get information either directly from an officer or from the Internet sites of national research organisations, the respective proportion is only one tenth or less in the case of France, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.

Table 4.3
Sources of information about the instrument – by country of work (percentages, multiple replies possible)

	AT	BE	DE	ES	FR	IT	NL	UK	Other EU-15/EFTA	New EU and candidate states	Total
From the Internet site of a research organisation of own countryFrom the Internet site of a research organisation of own country	29	31	13	11	7	14	3	11	13	13	13
From the ESF website	29	31	42	33	43	55	48	46	51	44	45
Directly from officers of national research organisations	24	12	13	15	7	16	10	5	14	22	13
From a colleague/staff member at own institution	29	35	38	37	33	41	48	42	24	41	37
ESF Leaflet on Call for Proposals	5	19	4	7	10	3	0	3	9	6	6
Advertisement of the Call for Proposals in scientific journals, i.e. Nature or Lancet	0	0	5	4	7	3	0	0	3	2	3
Colleagues from other institutions	10	4	4	19	10	3	13	8	11	4	8
Prior contacts with ESF/ESF newsletter	5	0	5	4	3	0	3	9	2	4	4
Other	0	0	0	0	7	0	3	0	1	0	1
Total	**129**	**131**	**124**	**130**	**127**	**136**	**129**	**123**	**130**	**135**	**129**
Count (n)	**(21)**	**(26)**	**(55)**	**(27)**	**(30)**	**(58)**	**(31)**	**(79)**	**(90)**	**(54)**	**(471)**

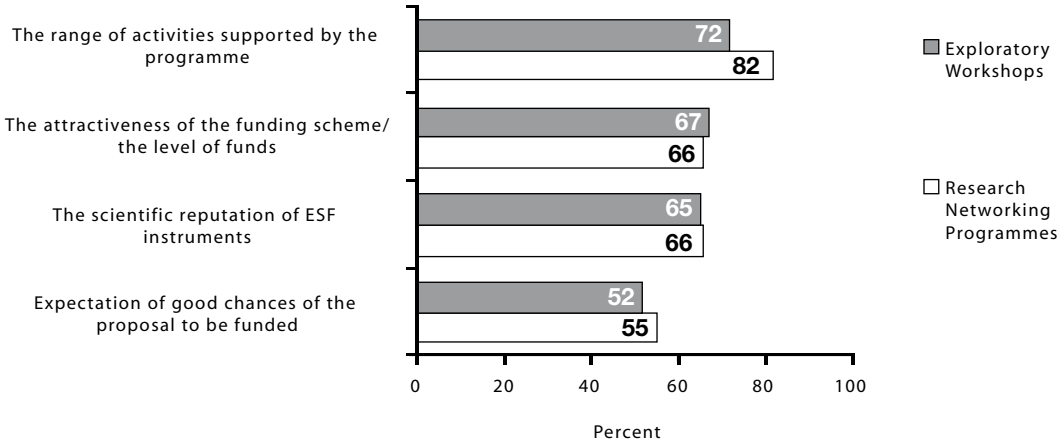
Question: How did you learn about the ESF Research Networking Programmes/Exploratory Workshops?
Missing cases: 3

Differences between the two annual cohorts of applicants were rather small. The only salient contrast is the lower use of the ESF website by the 2006 cohort (42% as compared with 48% of the 2005 cohort). However, this might be because in the 2006 group of applicants the proportion of scientists with prior involvement in ESF instruments is lower than in the 2005 cohort and that knowledge about the ESF website was less common.

4.2 Reasons for applying for an ESF grant

The questionnaire for ESF applicants contained a list of four possible reasons for the deci-sion to submit a proposal to ESF. Respondents considered the range of activities supported by the two instruments (76%) as being the most important, followed by the attractiveness of the funding scheme or the level of funds (67%) and the scientific reputation of ESF instruments (65%). The fourth issue, i.e. expectation of a good chance of the proposal being funded, was assessed as important by only about half of the scientists (53%).

Chart 4.1
Reasons for applying for an ESF grant – by ESF instrument (percentages of respondents considering the aspects as important)



Question: How important were the following reasons for your decision to apply to the ESF Research Networking Programmes? Scale from 1 = 'very important' to 5 = 'not important at all'. Categories 1 and 2 combined
Missing cases: 2

No differences in the importance of reasons could be found between the two annual cohorts of applicants addressed by the study. Also, a comparison of the motives of scientists applying for Research Networking Programmes on the one hand and for Exploratory Workshops on the other hand shows, in most aspects, a high level of similarity (see Chart 4.1). Only the range of activities supported by the ESF instrument played a more important role in the decision to apply for a Research Networking Programme than for an Exploratory Workshop (82% as compared with 72%).

Some of the applicants taking part in the survey made use of the opportunity to add further reasons to the predefined list. Besides the simple fact of previous good experiences with ESF, the following main reasons for submitting a proposal were mentioned:

- In the case of the Exploratory Workshops Scheme it was noted that this instrument allows discussions about developing a new research area. One respondent wrote that he had applied for 'purely scientific reasons, i.e. the necessity to improve discussion and strategies on a *specific scientific topic and the possibility for fundamental and frontier research'.* As highlighted by another respondent, there seems to be no other source of funding for this kind of activity: *'Hardly any other option: I know of no similar funding sources'.*

Other reasons mentioned include:

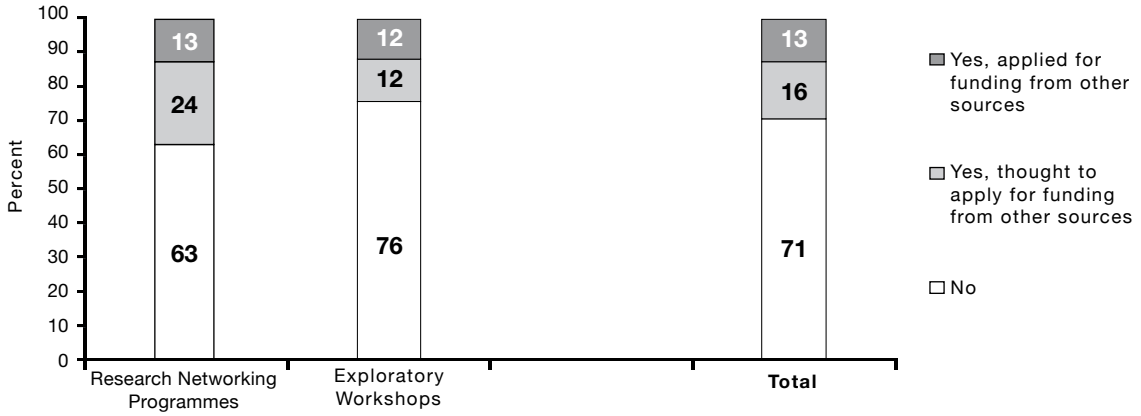
- the opportunity to create new international networks or to continue the work of existing networks,
- the overall scarcity of funding for international networks, and
- the relatively moderate administrative burden as compared with similar programmes (in the case of Research Networking Programmes).

4.3 Exploring alternative sources of funding

A large majority of the applicants (71%) did not explore other sources of funding for the activities they envisaged. Slightly less than one third of applicants had considered applying for funding for their particular project not only from ESF but also from another organisation: 16% stated that they had only 'thought about' alternatives and 13% finally submitted a proposal to another programme.

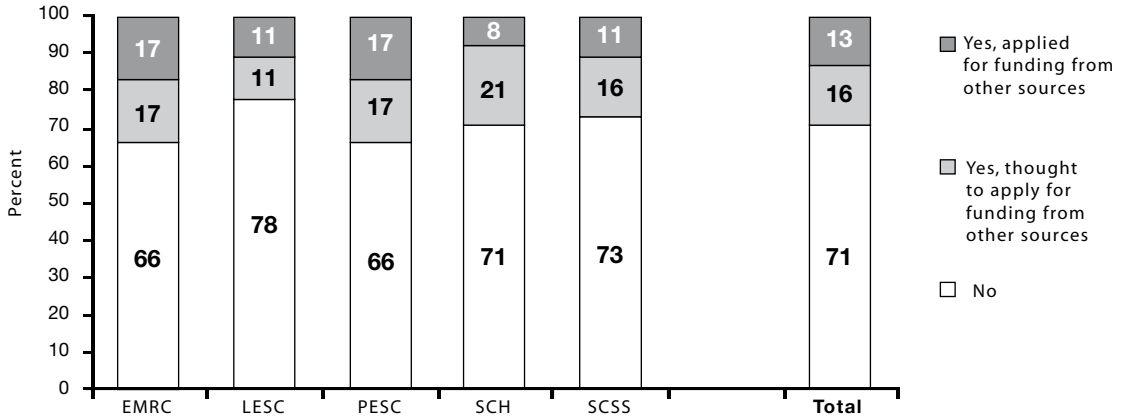
As Chart 4.2 shows, considering alternative funding was twice as frequent among applicants to ESF Research Networking Programmes as among applicants to Exploratory Workshops, implying that the funding for activities similar to Exploratory Workshops is not offered by other funding bodies on a widespread basis. However, the proportion of scientists actually applying for funding from other sources was more or less identical in both groups. It might be interesting to note that a relatively high proportion of respondents from the United Kingdom (21%) and from the Netherlands (19%) submitted proposals for their project not only to ESF but also to other organisations or programmes.

Chart 4.2
Consideration of alternatives sources of funding – by ESF instrument (percentages)



Question: Did you consider applying for funding for this particular project from another programme/another organisation?
Missing cases: 14

Chart 4.3
Consideration of alternatives sources of funding – by scientific area (percentages)



Question: Did you consider applying for funding for this particular project from another programme/another organisation?
Missing cases: 14
Scientific areas: EMRC: Medical Sciences; LESC: Life, Earth and Environmental Sciences; PESC: Physical and Engineering Sciences, SCH: Humanities; SCSS: Social Sciences.

Consideration of funding from other sources differs by scientific area (see Chart 4.3). While one third of scientists, all from Medical sciences and from Physical and Engineering Sciences at least thought about it, the proportion was only slightly higher than one quarter in Life, Earth and Environmental Sciences and less than one quarter in the Humanities and Social Sciences.

As alternatives to the ESF instruments not only the programmes of the European Commission were mentioned, i.e. the EC Framework Programmes, but also the COST and national organisations and research funding schemes;for example the UK Research Councils, the German Research Foundation (DFG) or the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO). Private foundations such as Fondazione San Paolo, in Italy or J.F. Costopoulos Foundation in Greece were also mentioned.

5. Preparation and submission of the application

5.1 Information provided by the ESF website

The European Science Foundation publishes application guidelines for various instruments on its own Internet site. Here, potentially interested scientists are provided with detailed information about key objectives, eligibility criteria, level and use of the budget, assessment criteria and procedures, the à la carte funding principle in the case of Research Networking Programmes and guidelines for the submission of proposals.

The vast majority of applicants is satisfied with regard to comprehensiveness and quality of information provided by the ESF website. Three quarters and more assessed positively the description of the objectives of the ESF instruments (86%), the guidelines for submission of proposals (81%), the information about eligibility criteria (77%) and information about the level and scope of funding (74%).

Relatively lower satisfaction is reported regarding the quality of information about procedures and criteria to be used in the assessment of applications (61%) or explanations concerning the involvement of partners from non-ESF countries.

However, the aspect most often criticised by the respondents is the à la carte principle on which the funding of Research Networking Programmes is based. Only 38% of respondents say that they were satisfied with the information provided on the role of national research funding agencies in selection procedures.

Table 5.1
Satisfaction with information provided by the ESF website (Call for Proposals) – by state of proposal assessment (percentages of satisfied respondents)

	Accepted	Pending	Rejected	Total
The objectives of the ESF instruments	95	89	80	86
The eligibility criteria	86	81	68	77
The involvement of partners from non-ESF countries, e.g. USA, Japan, etc. (RNPS only)	50	61	50	58
The level and scope of funding (activities for which the budget can be used)	78	78	71	74
Guidelines for submission of proposals	86	78	78	81
The procedures and criteria to be used in the assessment of applications	74	68	50	61
The à la carte funding principle (RNPs only)	36	38	42	38
Count (n)	**(132)**	**(116)**	**(220)**	**(468)**

Question: How satisfied were you with the information provided by the ESF website (Call for Proposals) on the following issues concerning the ESF Research Networking Programmes/Exploratory Workshops?
Scale from 1 = 'very satisfied' to 5 = 'not satisfied at all'. Categories 1 and 2 combined.
Missing cases: 6

As Table 5.3 shows, the judgment of information provided by the ESF website clearly correlates with the stage and outcome of the decision about funding. Highest satisfaction was expressed by applicants whose proposals were either accepted or on which the decision was pending. Largest differences between successful and unsuccessful candidates could be found relating to information about eligibility criteria and procedures and criteria for the assessment of applications. Obviously, negative funding decisions raised questions which, in retrospect, should have been answered prior to the decision to apply for an ESF grant or during the phase of preparing the proposal.

Table 5.2
Satisfaction with information provided by the ESF website (Call for Proposals) – by ESF instrument
(percentages of satisfied respondents with accepted proposals)

	Research Networking Programmes	Exploratory Workshops	Total
The objectives of the ESF instruments	89	94	94
The eligibility criteria	83	89	88
The involvement of partners from non-ESF countries, e.g. USA, Japan, etc.	53	0	53
The level and scope of funding (activities for which the budget can be used)	72	84	82
Guidelines for submission of proposals	76	89	87
The procedures and criteria to be used in the assessment of applications	72	81	79
The à la carte funding principle	28	0	28
Count (n)	**(18)**	**(90)**	**(108)**

Question: How satisfied were you with the information provided by the ESF website (Call for Proposals) on the following issues concerning the ESF Research Networking Programmes/Exploratory Workshops?
Scale from 1 = 'very satisfied' to 5 = 'not satisfied at all'. Categories 1 and 2 combined.

The composition of applicants to Research Networking Programmes by state of proposal assessment differs strongly from the respective composition of applicants to Exploratory Workshops: 31% of proposals for Research Networking Programmes but 70% of proposals for Exploratory Workshops were finally rejected at the time the survey was carried out. Because of the high correlation between the result of decisions and the judgment on information provided by ESF, a direct comparison of the two groups of respondents would have been misleading. By taking into account the interrelation and distinguishing, on the one hand, by type of instrument and, on the other, by the final decision on the proposal, a higher degree of satisfaction could be shown in the group of successful applicants to Exploratory Workshops regarding all aspects (see Table 5.2). The situation in the group of unsuccessful applicants is slightly more differentiated (see Table 5.3). While a greater number of applicants to Research Networking Programmes expressed their satisfaction with information on objectives and eligibility and selection criteria, applicants to Exploratory Workshops more often praised the information about levels and scope of funding and the guidelines for submission of proposals.

5. Preparation and submission of the application

Table 5.3
Satisfaction with information provided by the ESF website (Call for Proposals) – by ESF instrument (percentages of satisfied respondents with rejected proposals)

	Research Networking Programmes	Exploratory Workshops	Total
The objectives of the ESF instruments	90	80	82
The eligibility criteria	80	68	71
The involvement of partners from non-ESF countries, e.g. USA, Japan, etc.	52	0	52
The level and scope of funding (activities for which the budget can be used)	58	71	69
Guidelines for submission of proposals	73	79	77
The procedures and criteria to be used in the assessment of applications	56	50	51
The à la carte funding principle	40	0	40
Count (n)	**(51)**	**(208)**	**(259)**

Question: How satisfied were you with the information provided by the ESF website (Call for Proposals) on the following issues concerning the ESF Research Networking Programmes/Exploratory Workshops?
Scale from 1 = 'very satisfied' to 5 = 'not satisfied at all'. Categories 1 and 2 combined.

Table 5.4
Satisfaction of applicants to ESF Research Networking Programmes with information provided by the ESF website (Call for Proposals) – by year of application (percentages of satisfied respondents)

	2005	2006	Total
The objectives of the ESF instruments	89	89	89
The eligibility criteria	80	81	81
The involvement of partners from non-ESF countries, e.g. USA, Japan, etc.	50	62	58
The level and scope of funding (activities for which the budget can be used)	62	81	73
Guidelines for submission of proposals	72	83	79
The procedures and criteria to be used in the assessment of applications	62	68	66
The à la carte funding principle	38	38	38
Count (n)	**(66)**	**(104)**	**(170)**

Question: How satisfied were you with the information provided by the ESF website (Call for Proposals) on the following issues concerning the ESF Research Networking Programmes/Exploratory Workshops?
Scale from 1 = 'very satisfied' to 5 = 'not satisfied at all'. Categories 1 and 2 combined.
Missing cases: 1

With regard to most of the issues addressed in the survey, the proportion of satisfied applicants to Research Networking Programmes has increased from 2005 to 2006 (see Table 5.4). Obviously, the efforts undertaken by ESF to improve the quality of the description of instruments were successful, particularly information about the involvement of partners from non-ESF countries (62% as compared with 50% in 2005), about the level and scope of funding (62% as compared with 50%) and about the guidelines for submission of proposals (83% as compared with 72%). Notwithstanding the positive development, in many respects the dissatisfaction with the à la carte funding principle remains in full force.

Although information provided about Exploratory Workshops was also more positively assessed by the 2006 cohort of applicants, differences from the ratings of the 2005 cohort are so small that no systematic improvement could be considered (see Table 5.5).

5.2 Advice and support from the ESF Office or from national ESF Member Organisations

To asses the perception of the quality of service provided by the ESF Office an the application stage, respondents were asked if they had got in contact with the ESF Office prior to submitting the proposal, on which issues they had sought additional information and how they rated the responsiveness of ESF staff members.
Of scientists responding to the survey, 25% finally got in direct contact with the ESF Office in order to get additional information about contextual or formal aspects of preparation and submission of the proposal. The demand for clarifications was twice as high among applicants to Research Networking Programmes as among applicants to Exploratory Workshops (35% as compared with 17%). Differences between the two annual cohorts of applicants could not be observed.

Table 5.5
Satisfaction of applicants to ESF Exploratory Workshops with information provided by the ESF website (Call for Proposals) – by year of application (percentages of satisfied respondents)

	2005	2006	Total
The objectives of the ESF instruments	83	86	84
The eligibility criteria	73	76	74
The level and scope of funding (activities for which the budget can be used)	75	75	75
Guidelines for submission of proposals	81	82	82
The procedures and criteria to be used in the assessment of applications	58	60	59
Count (n)	**(160)**	**(138)**	**(298)**

Question: How satisfied were you with the information provided by the ESF website (Call for proposal) on the following issues concerning the ESF Research Networking Programmes/Exploratory Workshops?
Scale from 1 = 'very satisfied' to 5 = 'not satisfied at all'. Categories 1 and 2 combined.
Missing cases: 3

5. Preparation and submission of the application

Asked about the reasons for getting in direct contact with the ESF Office some respondents simply stated their wish to confirm information already available on the ESF website. However, the majority of scientists needed additional information to one or more of the following issues:

a) Questions concerning eligibility criteria
– eligibility and relevance of the research theme/ the envisaged content of the proposal;
– involvement of scientists from non-ESF countries;
– eligibility of special groups of persons, i.e. retired researchers or home country representatives; and
– overall number of participants in Exploratory Workshops and maximum number from individual countries.

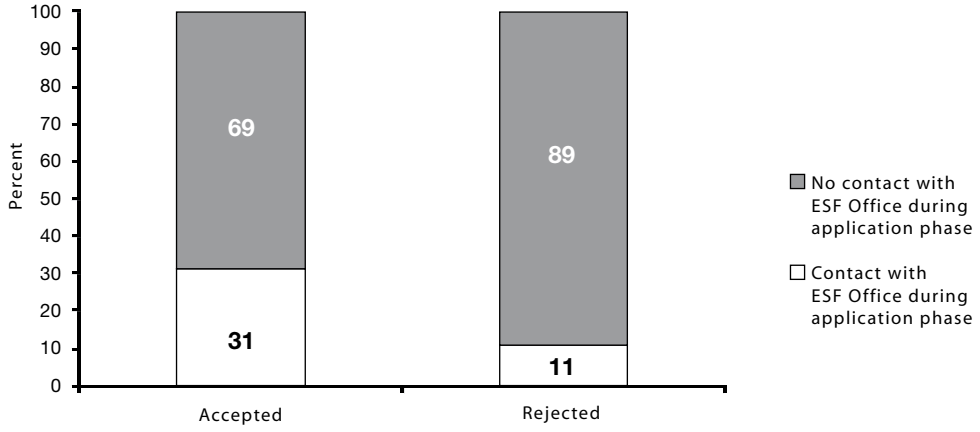
b) Financial issues
– explanation of the à la carte funding principle;
– details about grant allocation, e.g. activities for which the budget could be used.

c) Formal aspects of application, submission and assessment of proposal
– formal structure of application/proposal, e.g. possibility of exceeding the limit of pages for the proposal or the general design and requirements of an application;
– timing and procedures of application, e.g. the exact time of the deadline or the timing of the assessment; and
– submission of the proposal, e.g. the exact format of the file to be submitted.

d) Administration and implementation of the project
– clarification of the role of project coordinators in ESF Research Networking Programmes;
– possibility of making changes in the list of participants once the funding had been approved.

It might be interesting to note that proposals from applicants to Exploratory Workshops who checked open questions directly with the ESF Office were more often approved for funding (see Chart 5.1). No similar correspondence could be observed for Research Networking Programmes.

Chart 5.1
Result of proposal assessment for Exploratory Workshops – by contact with the ESF Office during the application phase (percentages)



Question: Please select the current stage of assessment of your proposal and tick the respective box:
Missing cases: 0

Overall, scientists expressed a high degree of satisfaction with support and advice offered by the ESF Office. More than four out of five respondents who made direct contact with ESF praised the promptness of handling requests (82%) and the preciseness of information provided (85%). Also, the friendliness and customer orientation of ESF staff members (85%), and the ease of discovering the appropriate contact person (82%) was positively viewed. Only the accessibility of ESF staff members on the phone was judged somewhat more critically (75% positive ratings).

By and large, applicants to Research Networking Programmes and for Exploratory Workshops were similarly satisfied with advice and support from the ESF Office (see Table 5.6). The lower ratings of the friendliness and customer orientation of ESF staff members and of the preciseness of information provided by scientists submitting a proposal for an Exploratory Workshop is a result of the higher proportion of rejected applicants in this group. As Table 5.7 shows, a negative decision about the proposal generally corresponds with a decrease of satisfaction whereby the largest differences in comparison with the total sample of respondents could be found in the assessment of the friendliness of ESF staff and the preciseness of information provided.

Table 5.6
Satisfaction with support and advice offered by the ESF Office via direct contact – by ESF instrument (percentages of satisfied respondents)

	Research Networking Programmes	Exploratory Workshops	Total
Friendliness and customer orientation of ESF staff members	88	82	85
Preciseness of information provided	87	82	85
Discovering the appropriate contact person within ESF	80	84	82
Promptness of handling requests and provision of information	83	80	82
Accessibility of ESF staff members on the phone	76	74	75
Count (n)	**(61)**	**(51)**	**(112)**

Question: How satisfied were you with the following aspects concerning support and advice from the ESF Office?
Scale from 1 = 'very satisfied' to 5 = 'not satisfied at all'. Categories 1 and 2 combined.
Missing cases: 0

5. Preparation and submission of the application

Table 5.7
Satisfaction with support and advice offered by ESF Office via direct contact – by state of proposal assessment (percentages of satisfied respondents)

	Accepted	Pending	Rejected	Total
Friendliness and customer orientation of ESF staff members	93	85	75	85
Preciseness of information provided	95	84	71	85
Finding the appropriate contact person within ESF	88	76	82	82
Promptness of handling requests and provision of information	88	80	75	82
Accessibility of ESF staff members on the phone	80	74	70	75
Count (n)	**(41)**	**(43)**	**(28)**	**(112)**

Question: How satisfied were you with the following aspects concerning support and advice from the ESF Office?
Scale from 1 = 'very satisfied' to 5 = 'not satisfied at all'. Categories 1 and 2 combined.
Missing cases: 0

One in three applicants to a Research Networking Programme got in contact with the ESF Member Organisation of his/her country prior to or after submission of the proposal. The pro-portion slightly decreased during the period of observation: from 33% of the 2005 cohort of applicants to 27% of the 2006 cohort.

Table 5.8
Reasons for contacting national ESF member organisation prior to or after submission of the proposal (percentages, multiple replies possible)

	2005	2006	Total
Getting more information about the à la carte principle	26	46	37
Getting more information about details of the funding scheme, application procedures etc.	35	50	43
Inform the ESF MO about my proposal	52	57	55
Clarify in advance the positive attitude of the ESF Member Organisation regarding the objectives of the proposal	17	29	24
Contacts for other reasons	9	4	6
Total	**139**	**186**	**165**
Count (n)	**(23)**	**(28)**	**(51)**

Question: Did you make contact with the ESF Member Organisation of your own country prior to or after submission of the proposal?
Missing cases: 0

The main reason for approaching the ESF Office was the wish of scientists to inform the national ESF Member Organisation about the proposal (55%), followed by a request for more information about details of the funding scheme (43%) and about the à la carte principle (37%). The attempt to assure themselves of the positive attitude of ESF Member Organisation regarding the objectives of the proposal was mentioned by 25% of applicants. Scientists in the 2006 cohort more often clarified not only one but several issues and more frequently were concerned about the à la carte funding principle and the positive attitude regarding their project (see Table 5.8).

Taking into account the significant role of national ESF Member Organisations in the final decision on funding of Research Networking Programmes it is surprising to note that only a minority of applicants made contact with their national agencies.

5.3 Online proposal-submission tool

A special online proposal-submission tool was developed by ESF for the submission of proposals for the two ESF instruments. It allowed the applicant to provide the required information (contact details, personal background, suggested referees etc.) by filling in online forms. Furthermore, a document could be uploaded which contained the proposal, the CV of the applicant, list of publications, etc. Since the introduction of this system only electronically submitted proposals are accepted by ESF.

Table 5.9
Experiences with the online grant submission tool – by year of application (percentages of respondents reporting significant difficulties)

	2005	2006	Total
Problems in understanding the instructions for individual steps of the submission process			
No problems	88	93	90
Minor problems	9	5	7
Significant problems	3	3	
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**
Count (n)	**(211)**	**(229)**	**(440)**
Technical problems, e.g. imperfect transfer of data			
No problems	85	90	88
Minor problems	7	5	6
Significant problems	8	5	7
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**
Count (n)	**(208)**	**(221)**	**(429)**

Question: To what extent did you or your colleague in charge of the online submission of the proposal encounter difficulties with the web submission system of ESF?
Scale from 1 = 'no problems at all' to 5 = 'significant problems'. Categories 4 and 5 combined.
Missing cases: 31

In response to a related question, nine out of ten applicants stated that they had no problems in understanding the individual steps of the submission process and that they had not experienced any technical problems while using the online proposal-submission tool. Those 10% who encountered difficulties stated the following aspects:

– high complexity of the submission form and request for massive data input,
– missing space in the form to write comments,
– information typed in was deleted when returning to a page later on,
– no possibility of saving the proposal and to continue inputting later,
– layout problems, some words were not readable on the application form,
– the submission tool refused files because the filenames were too long,
– impossible to submit the proposal under Linux: 'At a time when the EU tries to act against the monopoly of Microsoft this is not acceptable', comments one respondent,
– reply e-mail after submission does not state clearly if the submission was correct, and
– uncertainty whether the proposal was really sent.

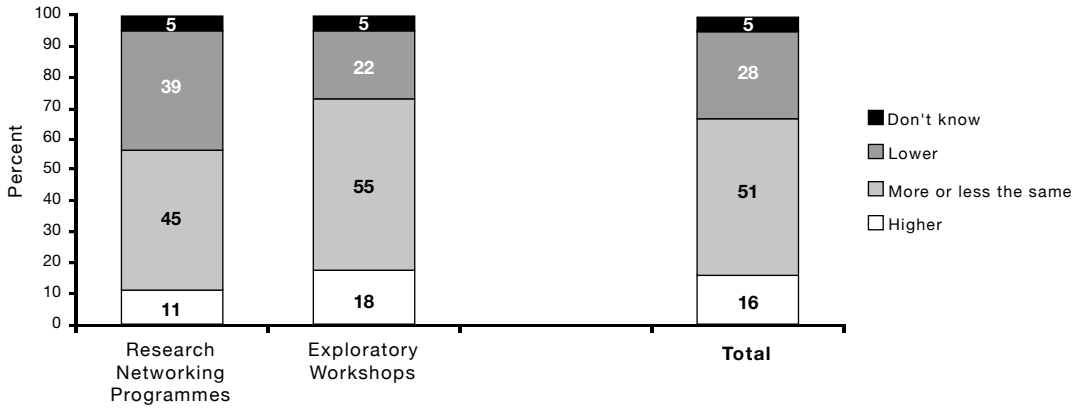
The decrease of the proportion of applicants stating technical problems from 2005 to 2006 (see Table 5.9) indicates that, seemingly, some of the problems mentioned above have been solved.

5.4 Overall burden of preparing and submitting the proposal

About half of the respondents considered the overall burden of preparing and submitting a proposal for ESF as more or less the same as for similar programmes. Only one in six applicants stated it to be a higher burden while slightly more than a quarter considered it lower. A small number of scientists had no experiences with applications for other programmes and therefore were not in a position to make a comparison (5%). It is noteworthy that applicants to the relatively complex Research Networking Programmes twice as often stated it to be a lower burden than applicants to Exploratory Workshops (see Chart 5.2).

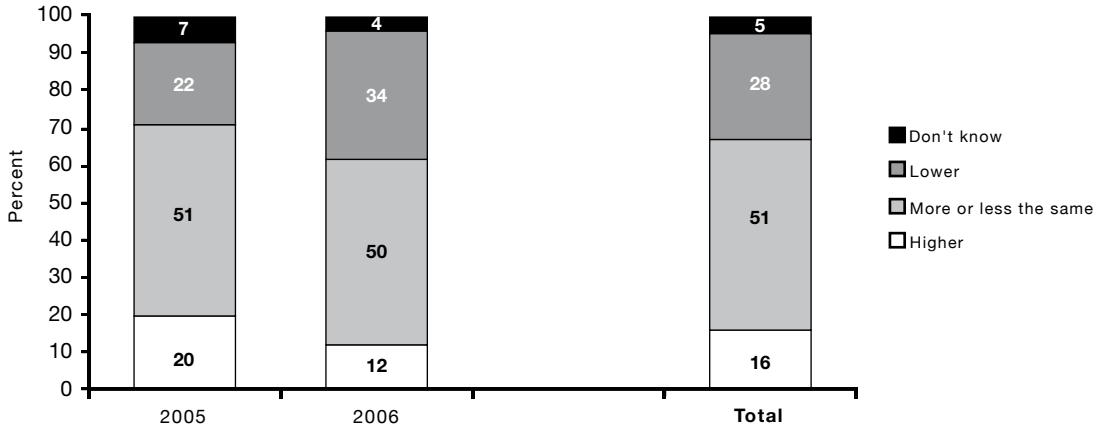
As Chart 5.3 shows, applicants in the 2006 cohort reported, more frequently than their colleagues from the previous year, that the overall burden of preparing and submitting the proposal was lower when compared with similar programmes (34% as compared with 22%). This development could be observed for both types of ESF instruments.

Chart 5.2
Overall burden of preparing and submitting a proposal for an ESF instrument in comparison with similar programmes – by ESF instrument (percentages)



Question: How do you rate the overall burden of preparing and submitting a proposal in the ESF Research Networking Programmes Scheme/ Exploratory Workshops as compared with similar programmes?
Missing cases: 5

Chart 5.3
Overall burden of preparing and submitting a proposal for ESF instrument in comparison with similar programmes – by year of application (percentages)



Question: How do you rate the overall burden of preparing and submitting a proposal in the ESF Research Networking Programmes Scheme/ Exploratory Workshops as compared with similar programmes?
Missing cases: 5

The respondents are divided on whether a standardised form for application would make it easier. Only one third says that this approach would make applications easier. The remaining respondents either refused to take a clear position (40%) or were convinced that a higher degree of standardisation would not lead to a reduction of the workload for preparing and submitting the proposal (28%).

A positive attitude regarding the standardised application form corresponds with the assessment of the burden of preparing and submitting the proposal. As Table 5.10 shows, applicants who stated a comparable high workload were clearly more often in favour of a standardised form than applicants who considered the burden as being rather low (47% as compared with 27%).

Table 5.10
Agreement that a standardised application form would ease the preparation and submission of proposals by assessment of the overall burden in preparing and submitting a proposal (percentages)

	Higher	More or less the same	Lower	Total
Yes	47	30	27	32
Don't know	40	42	34	40
No	13	28	38	28
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**
Count (n)	**(75)**	**(236)**	**(131)**	**(442)**

Question: Do you think that a standardised application form (either paper or online) would have made it easier for you to prepare and submit the proposal?
Missing cases: 32

Consequently, applicants to Exploratory Workshops who had rated the workload for preparing and submitting the proposal as comparably higher than had applicants to Research Networking Programmes were more in favour of standardised forms. Chart 5.4 shows the differences by ESF instrument.

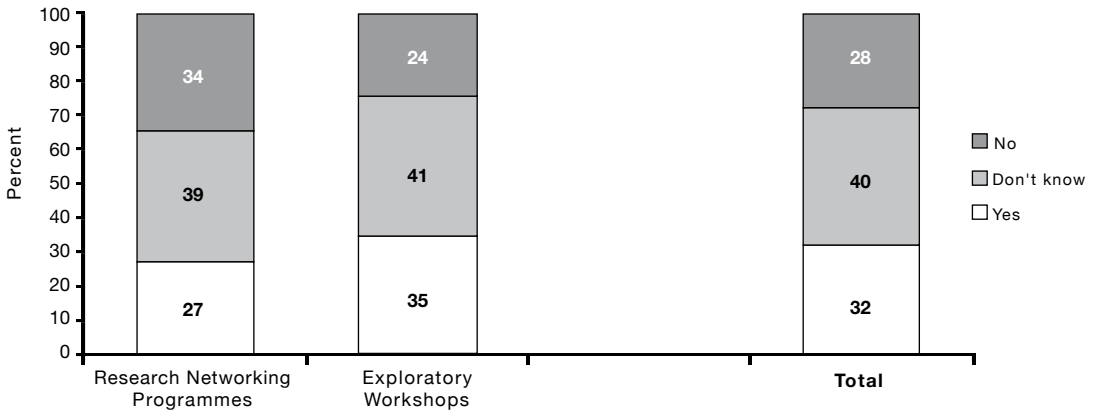
It is also noteworthy that scientist whose proposals for Exploratory Workshops were rejected more often appreciated the introduction of a standardised form than successful applicants to this type of ESF instruments (38% as compared with 28%). Obviously the investment of time was seen as being more critical by unsuccessful candidates and thus options to reduce the workload related to preparation and submission of proposals are welcome.

5.5 Suggestions for improvement of information and application procedures

In open questions applicants were asked for their comments and suggestions for improvement in the provision of information and in application procedures. Altogether, 133 respondents made use of this opportunity, among them 35 who stated that they were satisfied with the existing provisions and procedures. A substantial proportion of the remaining statements related to the assessment and selection mechanisms which will be discussed in the following chapters. Comments and suggestions directly related to the improvement of information and the application procedures mainly focused on eight topics:
– structure of ESF instruments
– timing of Call for Proposals
– distribution of information about the Calls
– language policy of ESF
– website of ESF
– guidelines for applicants
– application forms
– online submission-tool

A systematic collection of major suggestions by applicants for the improvement of information and application procedures is shown in Table 5.11.

Chart 5.4
Agreement that a standardised application form would ease the preparation and submission of proposals – by ESF instrument (percentages)



Question: Do you think that a standardised application form (either paper or online) would have made it easier for you to prepare and submit the proposal?
Missing cases: 7

Table 5.11
Overview of the suggestions of ESF applicants for improvements in information and application processes

1. Structure/modalities of ESF instruments	
Suggestions	**Related Statements**
Structure and clarity of ESF programmes should be improved	*The number of programmes on the ESF website is bewildering (especially across the different sciences) and I often found it difficult to find the specific programme (...) Once found however, things were quite clear. (EW)*
Allocation of a certain number of Exploratory Workshops to special groups of applicants, e.g. young researchers	*Subdivide the funding of Exploratory Workshops also for small groups or young researchers. (EW)*
Remove the restrictions on the number of non-European scholars taking part in Exploratory Workshops	*In theory, we would consider applying again, but it naturally depends on the suggested subject matter and the scope of the proposal. Our main difficulty was that when applying for funding for an Exploratory Workshop which was to bring together scholars specialising in North and West Africa as well as Central Asia, we wanted to include specialists coming from these regions. ESF's restrictions on the number of scholars to be invited from outside Europe constituted a criterion which we could not fulfil. Since we wish to continue working in regions outside Europe and we consider close cooperation with local scholars, as long as the ESF sticks to its present restriction on non-European scholars to be invited, in practice it is unlikely that we shall again put in a new application of a similar nature. (EW)*
2. Timing of Call for Proposals	
Suggestions	**Related Statements**
Two Calls per year	*Two Calls per year would be better. (RNP)*
The deadline for the Call for Proposals for Research Networking Programmes should be moved from autumn to spring	*The Call for Research Networking Programmes seems to come too late: October/November is not optimal bearing in mind the duration of the evaluation process. The results are known in May/June. This automatically rules out the possibility of getting additional support from national sources in those EU countries that may provide extra local support. Moreover, it complicates overall financial planning for the current year. In my opinion, a better date for the Call is March/ April, so the ESF Standing Committee has enough time to make the decision until the end of calendar year and the applicant has space for the appropriate planning in the subse-quent year. (RNP)*

5. Preparation and submission of the application

3. Distribution of information	
Suggestions	**Related Statements**
Information about ESF programmes should be more widely distributed	*Information about ESF programmes and also EU programmes could be distributed to applicants, in particular to those who had not yet been successful but were encouraged to reapply. (RNP)* *To make it simpler to find the new Call for each field of research. (EW)* *Is there a newsletter, e-mail-network for an ESF-interested researcher? (EW)*

4. Language policy of ESF	
Suggestions	**Related Statements**
ESF should allow the provision of proposals in languages other than English	*If other major European languages were accepted, application procedures would be easier. (EW)* *There should be the option of submitting proposals in French or other European languages. (EW)*

5. Internet site of ESF in general	
Suggestions	**Related Statements**
The ESF website should be improved	*The main programme website could be more instructive. I experienced problems with the links which worked in a somewhat circular fashion taking me back to a page I'd seen before or one that was irrelevant. (RNP)* *I found it difficult to navigate the website sometimes. Guidelines were not on the same page as deadlines for submission. Guidelines close to the deadline for submission also seemed to differ from those found at the beginning of the period. (RNP)* *There should be links on the homepage as to whom to address with more specific questions. ESF Member Organisations are generally overloaded and cannot give information about ESF procedures in detail. (RNP)*

6. Guidelines for applicants	
Suggestions	**Related Statements**
Clearer guidelines on funding breakdowns	*Clearer guidelines on funding breakdowns for the different project activity types would be very useful (RNP)*
More and better Information about the assessment and selection of proposals	*The information about the Steering Committee is really not very clear in the information on the website. (RNP)* *The amount of money available for workshops for each year should be specified so that applicants can envisage the probability of being successful. (EW)* *I regret the fact that my proposal was rejected. However, I should have looked more closely at the list of projects that did get funding in the past: legal projects are very rare... This could have been made more explicit. (EW)* *It is difficult to know how the proposals are assessed (composition of panels, selection of referees, etc.) (EW)* *Explain the role of the referees nominated by the applicant and explain better the refereeing system. (EW)*
Better explanation of the à la carte principle	*The à la carte system seems to be "a black box" and the decision process is obscure as the national agencies are completely free as to whether they support a project or not. I was surprised by the question in this questionnaire asking whether I had contacted the national agency regarding the project. From the material found on the website I have learnt that after the submission of the proposal no additional information can be accepted. in case any contact with the national agency should be regarded as some kind of corruption. (RNP)* *The hierarchy between decision-making processes at national and ESF levels should be clarified. (RNP)* *The role of the national funding organisations was not clear and their deadlines were different from those of ESF. Deadlines differ for each participating country, making the passing of information and national application very complex and time-consuming. (RNP)*
More information about Thematic priorities of ESF	*It would be better if the thematic criteria chosen every year were clearly explained. (EW)* *It would be useful in advance to know what are, within each research field, the topics that are most likely to be funded. In fact, my application received the highest scores, but in the end was not funded because the topic was not on the priority list of the Standing Committee. This is quite strange, and a waste of time for everybody. (EW)*

Provision of examples for preparing the proposal	*It would be useful to have access to examples of applications in the same field that were successful in the past. (EW)* *Provide examples of budget allocations. (RNP)*
Better explanation of possible exclusion criteria	*Both myself and the co-applicant would like to emphasise that we were very much annoyed by the fact that nowhere in the Call was it stated that ESF does not fund proposals for workshops that could be undertaken by schemes already funded by the ESF. If this was clearly stated we would probably not have applied for funding to ESF. Although our proposal received very high marks, it was rejected on the grounds that 'the coordinators pretend to not know the ESF-funded (research networking programme on the same topic)..... There is no point in financing a workshop that could be organised within the already established ESF programme.' We think that we have been misled and mis-informed, wasting a lot of time, both ours and the people we contacted to participate to the proposed work-shop. Had we known that ESF does not fund a certain type of workshop; we would not have applied to the ESF. We certainly did not 'pretend' anything; of course we know of (the Programme mentioned) and we know the people involved, what we did not know was (only people involved in this programme can organise a workshop and if it is open to everybody). Moreover, the comment that 'the coordinators pretend to not know.' was very insulting. (EW)*

7. Application form	
Suggestions	**Related Statements**
ESF should introduce a standard application form	*Overall, the application process was very straightforward with most of the information required being avail-able on the ESF website. However, a standard application form would have been useful. (RNP)* *Standardised application forms on the ESF website would be very helpful (similar to Te-S System of EPSRC, UK). (EW)* *More detailed information on preparing the proposal – what is really needed. Could be easily optimised with more standardised application forms. (EW)*

8. Online submission-tool	
Suggestions	**Related Statements**
A list of precise questions on the online form should be available in advance	*Better information about the precise questions you have to expect when you fill in the online application. (RNP)*
More space in the submission format to explain scientific issues	*Not enough space in the submission format can be devoted to the exposition of scientific background and purposes of the Programme. (RNP)*
Possibility to save and overwrite entries in the submission tool	*To consider having a 'save your work' option. A model of e-submissions that I am very familiar and I think it works quite well is the one at NSERC in Canada. It may be a good idea to have a look at it and incorporate some ideas (researchers' profiles, automatic creation of pdf forms etc.). (RNP)* *My only comment relates to my long-winded statement above: in the electronic submission process it should be possible to a) overwrite the submission with a newer one, and b) be able to verify exactly what has been submitted through a download facility. The EC's EPSS system can do both of these and it was a surprise to me with this system when I couldn't do this. I hope my memory serves me right in all of this as it was some time ago that I made the submission. (RNP)*
Better feedback if the proposal was successfully submitted	*Would be nice to have a pdf as feedback about how the ESF received the submitted file. (EW)*

6. Assessment and selection of proposals

The third section of the questionnaires aimed at collecting the views of the applicants on the criteria and methods by which ESF assessed and selected proposals for Exploratory Workshops or Research Networking Programmes. This chapter presents the analysis of answers provided and lists a number of comments that the respondents made about their experiences. The concluding section of the chapter highlights the suggestions made by the respondents to improve the process.

6.1 Duration of the main phases from application to final decision

Asked for their opinion on the length of the different phases from application to final decision the vast majority of applicants to both ESF instruments (88% in the case of Research Networking Programmes and 84% in the case of Exploratory Workshops) considered the time between the launch and the closing of the Calls for Proposals as appropriate. While, obviously, the available time for preparing and submitting the proposal was sufficient, a more critical view can be observed with respect to the second phase of the process; the time between submission of the proposal and information about the outcome of the assessment. Half the respondents judged this time-span as too long. Again, applicants to both ESF instruments did not differ substantially in their opinions (see Table 6.1).

Table 6.1
Assessment of the duration of the main phases from application to final decision – by ESF instrument (percentages)

	Research Networking Programmes	Exploratory Workshops	Total
Time between the launch and the closing of the Call for Proposals			
Too short	5	7	6
Appropriate	88	84	85
Too long	3	5	5
Don't know	4	4	4
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**
Count (n)	**(167)**	**(294)**	**(461)**
Time between submission of the proposal and information about the outcome of the assessment			
Too short	1	0	0
Appropriate	40	47	44
Too long	46	51	49
Don't know	13	2	6
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**
Count (n)	**(164)**	**(290)**	**(454)**

Question: How would you assess the duration of the main phases from application to final decision?
Missing cases: 12

The final decision on funding of Research Networking Programmes not only depends on the ESF Standing Committee but, as a consequence of the à la carte funding principle, also on the agreement of national ESF Member Organisations. Therefore, applicants to this ESF instrument were also asked about their views on the length of the time between the assessment by the ESF Standing Committee and the final decision. In part because some final decisions concerning the 2006 applications had not been taken, at the time the survey was conducted 50% of applicants from this cohort refused to assess the length of the third phase and responded with 'don't know'. Also surprisingly, 25% of the 2005 cohort saw him/herself not in the position to provide a clear judgment (see Table 6.2). It could be assumed that a substantial proportion of scientists understands the difficult and possibly time-consuming processes of coordination and decision making on both national and international level but has, on the other hand, no clear yardstick to assess the appropriateness of the length of this phase. However, clearly more than two thirds of applicants to Research Networking Programmes were either unable to judge the length of the final decision phase (40%) or considered this phase as being too long (32%).

No remarkable differences in the assessment of the length of main phases from application to final decision between applicants from different scientific areas could be observed for Research Networking Programmes or for Exploratory Workshops.

Table 6.2
Assessment of the time between information about the assessment and the final decision by the ESF Executive Board – by year of application (percentages*)

	2005	2006	Total
Too short	2	1	1
Appropriate	42	18	27
Too long	32	32	32
Don't know	24	50	40
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**
Count (n)	**(62)**	**(101)**	**(163)**

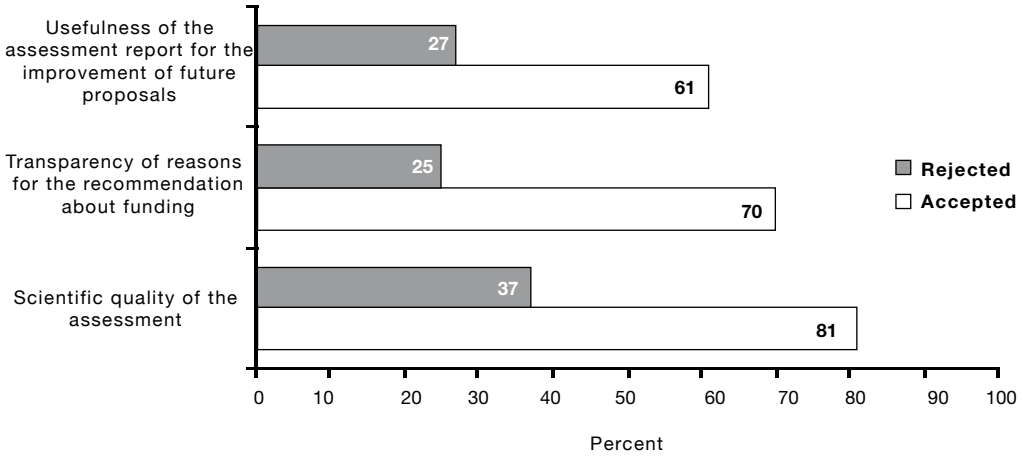
Question: How would you assess the duration of the main phases from application to final decision?
Missing cases: 10
* Only applicants to Research Networking Programmes

6.2 Proposal assessment and selection mechanisms

In order to ensure at least a certain degree of transparency of the assessment and selection of proposals all applicants are provided with a summary of the assessment report written by the proposal's reviewers. At the time the survey was conducted, almost all applicants to Exploratory Workshops and the 2005 cohort of applicants to Research Networking Programmes were in possession of these summaries. The reviews of proposals for Research Networking Programmes of the 2006 cohort were either not finished in January 2007 or members of this group had not yet been informed about the result of the review process. Thus, the following analysis can be based only on the responses of scientists who applied for Exploratory Workshops and the 2005 cohort of applicants to Research Networking Programmes.

Overall, the quality and the usefulness of the reports were seen negatively by a large number of ESF applicants. Only slightly more than half of the respondents expressed their satisfaction with the scientific quality of the assessment of proposals by independent reviewers. The transparency of reasons for the recommendation on funding was judged positively by only 42%, and only 39% considered the assessment report as useful for the improvement of future proposals. It might not come as a surprise that satisfaction with the reports was much lower among the rejected applicants (see Chart 6.1). Only about one third of scientists in this group praised the scientific quality and only about one quarter praised the transparency of recommendations about funding or the usefulness for the future.

Chart 6.1
Satisfaction with the summary of the ESF assessment report on the proposal – by state of proposal assessment (percentages of satisfied respondents)



Question: How satisfied were you with the summary of the ESF's assessment report on your proposal provided to you by ESF? Scale from 1 = 'very satisfied' to 5 = 'not satisfied at all'. Categories 1 and 2 combined.
Missing cases: 22

Differences in the assessment of summary reports between applicants to Research Networking Programmes and Exploratory Workshops or applicants from various scientific areas are mainly shaped by the composition of subgroups in terms of successful and unsuccessful candidates. In other words, the higher the proportion of rejected applicants the lower the satisfaction with the assessment report in a certain group.

Table 6.3 shows the judgments of applicants whose projects were funded while Table 6.4 contains only the responses of rejected applicants. It might be interesting to note that in the case of positive decisions only small differences between applicants to Exploratory Workshops and applicants to Research Networking Programmes could be observed while in the case of negative decisions the Workshop applicants are considerably less satisfied with the quality and usefulness of ESF assessment reports.

Table 6.3
Satisfaction with the summary of the ESF assessment report on the proposal – by ESF Instrument
(percentages of respondents whose proposal were accepted)

	Research Networking Programmes	Exploratory Workshops	Total
Scientific quality of the assessment	86	90	90
Transparency of reasons for the recommendation on funding	85	84	84
Usefulness of the assessment report for the improvement of future proposals	77	68	69
Count (n)	**(14)**	**(83)**	**(97)**

Question: How satisfied were you with the summary of the ESF's assessment report on your proposal provided to you by ESF?
Scale from 1 = 'very satisfied' to 5 = 'not satisfied at all'. Categories 1 and 2 combined.

Table 6.4
Satisfaction with the summary of the ESF assessment report on the proposal – by ESF Instrument
(percentages of respondents whose proposals were rejected)

	Research Networking Programmes	Exploratory Workshops	Total
Scientific quality of the assessment	59	35	39
Transparency of reasons for the recommendation on funding	35	23	25
Usefulness of the assessment report for the improvement of future proposals	41	25	27
Count (n)	**(37)**	**(202)**	**(239)**

Question: How satisfied were you with the summary of the ESF's assessment report on your proposal provided to you by ESF?
Scale from 1 = 'very satisfied' to 5 = 'not satisfied at all'. Categories 1 and 2 combined.

6. Assessment and selection of proposals

The reasons for the large differences between the two groups of rejected applicants cannot be clearly determined on the basis of the available data. However, unsuccessful scientists who had applied for an Exploratory Workshop particularly complained that their proposal had got excellent grades from the reviewers but finally was not funded, with no comprehensible explanation being given. Some answers to open questions may illustrate the annoyance of those scientists affected:

Although our proposal got excellent rankings and comments from the evaluators, the proposal was not funded. The reason for that remained unclear. (EW)

A similar proposal which received excellent reviews from all reviewers was rejected the year before because the funding resources were insufficient, we improved the proposal according to the few suggestions of the reviewers, and in 2005 the proposal was rejected again. (EW)

Apparently little connection between assessment reports and reasons for not funding the proposed workshop. (EW)

I simply don't understand what are the criteria for funding, given that we received entirely positive reports and recommendations from everybody. There was not a single phrase of criticism. So how could I improve my future proposals in order to get funding. (EW)

There was no explanation of why the workshop was not funded really, except the inclusion of two references where the only non-positive comment was one saying we were 'too junior' to run such a workshop. The scientific quality of the workshop was throughout recognised as excellent. So to be honest I am not at all satisfied with the reasons for the refusal. Particularly as a few weeks later this [proposal] was funded by the British Academy who will now sponsor our event. And, since making the ESF application, I have received considerable interest and support from a number of main scholars in this area who have thought that the idea behind the workshop is excellent and very timely, hence the collaboration (which now resulted in the workshop being organised at one prestigious British university). (EW)

With respect to the scientific quality of the reports some of the applicants were concerned about the differences in the assessments of individual reviewers or expressed their doubts about the qualification and suitability of persons in charge of the reviews:

The assessors should be prepared for transdisciplinarity. (EW)

Only two (of the expected three) review reports were supplied. One was positive, the other sceptical because of misunderstanding of terminology used in the application. (EW)

The quality was very different between the reviewers. One apparently did not understand anything of the domain. (EW)

The quality of the assessment team was very bad in my opinion. I think that one of them did not understand our proposal topic or wanted to eliminate it. One assessor gave the maximum and one the minimum points in the majority of aspects. This shows that the system is not very trustworthy. (EW)

The conception and practical running of this funding programme are very good. I am not convinced, however, by the actual selection process. Sensible rules and effective administration do not guarantee sound choices. My impression is that the people who select projects are scientifically second rate and thus select scientifically second-rate submissions. I'm not saying this because my project was not funded, but because all the ones that were (in areas that I have some knowledge of) are distinctly unimpressive. My conclusion is that if I were to apply again I'd have to make the project look softer, geared more towards a lay audience than towards serious science. (EW)

Apart from comments on incomprehensible discrepancies between positive assessment and the final decision and the quality of the reviews, some statements also addressed the application of too strict rules:
Looking at the successful projects, I get the distinct impression that, at least in Social Sciences, the ESF favours soft, trendy topics rather than more scientific submissions. I had never heard of any of the successful applicants before! (EW)

Somehow I feel that the criteria of not having listed an American scholar in the field was not in line with the proposal criteria. (EW)

The need to include partners from Eastern Europe or the Baltic countries was not clear to us when writing the application. (EW)

I was very shocked by the outcome. The ranking by experts was very high. Yet my proposal was rejected for non-scientific reasons: only because it lacked any connection with 'European matters'! So we are back to the same old boys' network and the same political game just as (in some other institutions). (RNP)

Applicants for Research Networking Programmes also commented on the à la carte principle:

I am not too happy with the à la carte principle as this involves approaching all national schemes to lobby etc. Also, the possibility of getting a Network approved but without sufficient funding is not encouraging. (RNP)

The à la carte, principle naturally pushes the project organisers to look for colleagues from the biggest countries, i.e. those with bigger funding agencies. (RNP)

The à la carte principle doesn't make sense. We put too much effort into a proposal that has actually a minimal chance of being funded and the decision on funding is more a political one. (RNP)

A la carte principle: makes it difficult to plan because the outcome of the proposal does not only depend on its content but also on decisions that are beyond the applicant's responsibility. We do not know according to which criteria the national research organisations operate: I found it very hard (impossible) to establish a group for the RNP with one single representative from each country being scientifically reputable in the particular field of the proposal, and at the same time to establish a parity with regard to (other aspects which might play a role in decision making). (RNP)

6.3 Suggestions for improvement of assessment and selection of proposals

In response to an open question a substantial number of ESF applicants communicated not only their views on proposal assessment and selection mechanisms but also made suggestions for the improvement of the most criticised elements of the process. The following issues especially were the focus of applicants' responses:
– organisation of the assessment process in general
– criteria for selection of proposals
– rules for selecting the referees
– mechanisms for the clarification of disputes between referees
– information about the final outcome of the assessment process
– duration of the assessment process
– possibility of resubmitting a proposal.

A detailed overview of suggestions for the improvement of quality and transparency of assessment and selection of proposals is provided in Table 6.5.

6. Assessment and selection of proposals

Table 6.5
Suggestions of ESF applicants for the improvement of assessment and selection of proposals

1. Organisation of the assessment process in general	
Suggestions	**Related Statements**
ESF should anonymise the assessment of proposals	*It would be better if the assessment is conducted in an anonymous fashion. This can really stop the nepotism which may otherwise surface. Furthermore, if objective criteria are set for assessing the proposals at the out-set, the applicants can prepare their proposals reflecting such criteria. (EW)* *I would prefer to have a double-blind, evaluation procedure, to ensure that the quality of the proposal and not a high ranking applicant's name is responsible for its funding. And give young and female scientists a chance!!! (EW)*
A two-step application and assessment process should be introduced	*I would prefer the selection procedure in two steps: Step 1: A small abstract of the work and the details of the group involved. ESF should initially screen the most eligible projects from this data; Step 2: Final submission of the project with work plan, activities etc. (RNP)*

2. Criteria for selection of proposals	
Suggestions	**Related Statements**
Take into account country proportions when distributing the money for Exploratory Workshops	*I would suggest taking into account the number of applications per country and evaluate accordingly. (EW)*
Put less weight on the track record of the applicants	*The track record of the applicants seemed to carry too much weight. New ideas do not come with a long track record! Exploratory Workshops are not an old boys' gathering! (EW)*

3. Rules for selecting the referees	
Suggestions	**Related Statements**
Referees should be competent in the field of the proposal	*Again, the assessors should be prepared for transdisciplinarity. (EW)* *Evaluators did not come from our field of expertise. (EW)* *Try to recruit evaluators who are competent in the field of the proposal. (EW)*

4. Mechanisms for the clarification of disputes between referees	
Suggestions	**Related Statements**
In the case of opposing opinions by referees, a further referee should be employed to clarify the different conclusions	*Peer review is essential BUT when two different referees say 'excellent' and 'too poor', this must be clarified and not automatically cause the rejection of the proposal (RNP)* *All negative evaluations should be transparent, scientific and fair. In the case of opposite opinions of two referees, a third opinion should be sought. (EW)* *In the case of strongly differing assessments: additional third review. (EW)* *In our case, the two reviewers had completely opposite views. It would have been appropriate to contact a third one in order to avoid a rejection based on a single negative assessment. (EW)*
Allow applicants to reply to the assessment of proposals by the referees	*Our proposal was reviewed by four referees. Three of them gave excellent evaluations, suggesting approval of the proposal. One referee found the proposal not appropriate. However, from his/her report it is clear that this referee was mainly complaining because we did not include a particular group in the network. This group is completely unknown to the community that works in the field of research of our interest. I believe that it would be very important to add one step to the selection mechanism, namely, the proposers should be allowed to reply to referees. This mechanism would be of fundamental importance for a correct evaluation of the projects. (RNP)* *Perhaps it might be useful to allow applicants to respond to the arguments in the assessment report before the final funding decision. We were very grateful for the comments and the suggestions of the assessor, but we did not agree with them. A response mechanism might have made our objections clearer.*

5. Information about the final outcome of the assessment process	
Suggestions	**Related Statements**
Provide information about the relative position of proposals based on the result of assessment	*I would appreciate information about the relative position of a proposal that is not recommended for funding, in order to know whether it is worthwhile to improve it and try again. (RNP)* *It would be nice to have some overview of all proposals and the position of that of the applicant compared with the others. (EW)* *It is good that the ratings of the proposal are sent out but it would be of help to also get information about relative position. (RNP)*
Provide more information about the reasons for the rejection of a proposal	*More transparency as to why a proposal is rejected is necessary. It is highly unsatisfactory to get only a note saying that ', it is not as convincing and mature as other proposals'. (EW)*

6. Assessment and selection of proposals

6. Duration of the assessment process	
Suggestions	**Related Statements**
The length of the decision process should be reduced	*Communication with applicants should be more intensive. And I really do not understand why the procedure takes so long. If this has a reason, it should be properly explained to prospective proposers. If there is no clear reason why it takes so long, the period really should be shortened. (EW)* *We would like to have more information after submission. It took a very long time to get the answer and we are still waiting for the final decision that was promised for last November (we are mid February now). (RNP)* *A major factor which prevents more applications under ESF programmes is the time taken to review and inform applicants of decisions. Waiting 9-10 months is hard to work into academic research cycles – when involving trade, policy and government agencies the delay becomes unworkable. (EW)*

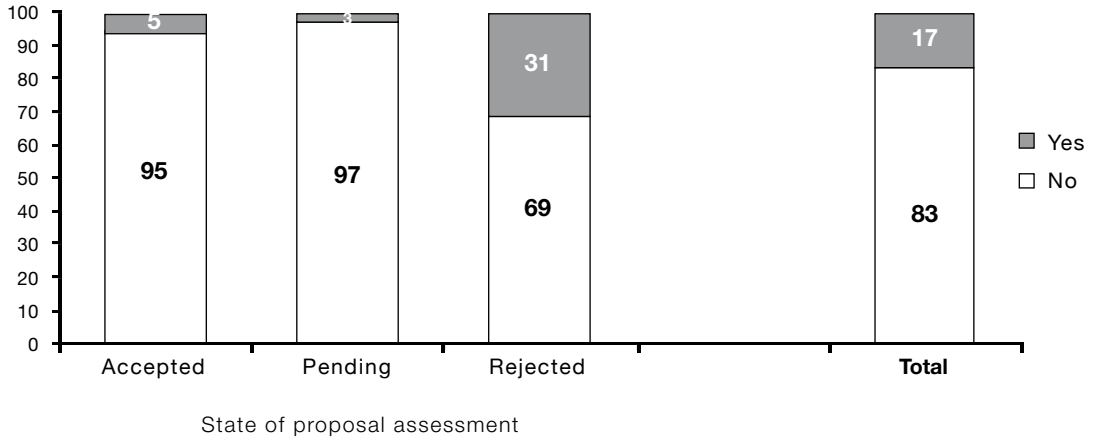
7. Possibility of resubmitting a proposal	
Suggestions	**Related Statements**
Provide an opportunity to resubmit good proposals	*Proposals that are rated close to the threshold should have an opportunity to be resubmitted; the chance of being successful is hard to assess. (EW)*

7. Overall assessment

Despite some critical comments on the assessment and selection of proposals, the majority of respondents could imagine applying again for an ESF grant (83%). Almost all applicants whose projects were finally accepted for funding or who were waiting for the decision gave an affirmative answer to this question . On the other hand, about one third of the rejected applicants seems to be lost as future customers of ESF funding instruments (see Chart 7.1).

A major reason for turning away from ESF, most scientists stressed the point that despite the excellent rating of their proposal by the reviewers the final decision was negative. Other reasons are mistrust regarding the quality of referees and the fairness of the evaluation of proposals, the unacceptable length of the period between submission of the proposal and the final decision, the low probability of being successful, too much effort for too little money or too much effort for what was seen to be a game of chance.

Chart 7.1
Applying again for an ESF grant based on previous ESF experience – by state of proposal assessment (percentages)



Question: In summarising your experiences when applying for a grant from the ESF Research Networking Programmes/Exploratory Workshops, could you imagine applying again?
Missing cases: 15

Appendices

Appendix 1

Survey of Applicants to ESF Exploratory Workshops

Call for Proposals 2005 and 2006

Appendix 2

Survey of Applicants to ESF Research Networking Programmes

Call for Proposals 2005 and 2006

Survey of Applicants to ESF Exploratory Workshops
Call for Proposals 2005 and 2006

Applicant's Survey Identification Number (SID):

A. Decision to Apply for an ESF Grant

1. How did you learn about the ESF Exploratory Workshop Scheme? (multiple reply possible)

- ☐ From the internet site of a research organisation of my own country
- ☐ From the internet site of the European Science Foundation (ESF)
- ☐ Directly from officers of national research organisations
- ☐ From a colleague/staff member at my institution
- ☐ ESF Leaflet of the Call for Proposals
- ☐ Advertisement of the Call for Proposals in scientific journals, i.e. *Nature* or *Lancet*
- ☐ Other, please specify: _____

2. How important were the following reasons for your decision to apply to the ESF Exploratory Workshop Scheme?

	Very important				Not important at all
	1	2	3	4	5
The attractiveness of the funding scheme / the level of funds	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The range of activities supported by the programme	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Expectation of good chances of the proposal to be funded	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The scientific reputation of ESF instruments	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Other, please specify: _____	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

3. Have you taken into consideration to apply for funding for this particular workshop from another programme / another organisation

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes, I have thought to apply for funding from _____
- ☐ Yes, beside ESF I also applied for funding from _____

B. Preparation and Submission of the Application

4. How satisfied were you with the information provided by the ESF Website (Call for proposal) on the following issues concerning the ESF Exploratory Workshop Scheme?

	Very satisfied				Not satisfied at all
	1	2	3	4	5
The objectives of the ESF Exploratory Workshop Scheme	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The eligibility criteria	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The level and scope of funding (activities for which the budget can be used for)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Guidelines for submission of proposals	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The procedures and criteria to be used in the assessment of applications	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

5. During the preparation phase of your application, have you contacted the ESF Office to get additional information?

☐ No **--> go to Question 7**

☐ Yes, I contacted the ESF office to get information about the following issue(s) (please specify):

_____

_____

_____

6. How satisfied were you with the following aspects concerning support and advice from the ESF Office?

	Very satisfied 1	2	3	4	Not satisfied at all 5
Finding the appropriate contact person within ESF	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Preciseness of information provided	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Promptness of handling requests and provision of information	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Friendliness and customer orientation of ESF staff members	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Accessibility of ESF staff members on the phone	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Other, please specify: _____	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

7. To what extent did you or your colleague in charge of the on-line submission of the proposal encounter difficulties with the web submission system of ESF?

	No problems at all 1	2	3	4	Significant problems 5	Don't know 6
Understanding of the instructions for single steps of the submission process.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Technical problems, e.g. imperfect transfer of data	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Other, please specify: _____	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

8. Do you think that a standardised application form (either paper or on-line) would have made it easier for you to prepare and submit the proposal?

☐ Yes

☐ Don't know

☐ No, because: _____

9. How do you rate the overall burden of preparing and submitting a proposal in the ESF Exploratory Workshop Scheme as compared to similar programmes?

Much higher 1	Higher 2	More or less the same 3	Lower 4	Much lower 5	Don't know 6
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

10. Do you have any further comments or suggestions for improvements of information and the application procedures for ESF Exploratory Workshops?

_____

_____

_____

C. Quality and Transparency of Assessment and Selection of Proposals

11. In which year did you apply for funding from the ESF Exploratory Workshop Scheme?

☐ 2005 Call for proposals **--> go to question 13**

☐ 2006 Call for proposals

12. Please select the current stage of assessment of your proposal and tick the respective box:

☐ No information from ESF since the submission of the proposal **--> go to question 15**

☐ Receipt of acknowledgement that the proposal has been received by ESF **--> go to question 15**

☐ Receipt of the outcome of the assessment of the proposal by the ESF Standing Committee in my scientific area

13. Has your proposal finally been approved for funding?

☐ Yes

☐ No

14. How satisfied were you with the summary of the ESF's assessment report on your proposal provided to you by ESF?

	Very satisfied 1	2	3	4	Not satisfied at all 5
Scientific quality of the assessment	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Transparency of reasons for the recommendation about funding	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Usefulness of the assessment report for the improvement of future proposals	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Other, please specify: _____	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

15. How would you assess the duration of the main phases from application to final decision?

	Too short 1	Appro-priate 2	Too long 3	Don't know 4
Time between the launch and the closing of the call for proposals	☐	☐	☐	☐
Time between submission of the proposal and information about the outcome of the assessment by the ESF Standing Committees	☐	☐	☐	☐

16. Do you have any further comments on the proposal assessment and selection mechanisms or the funding decision?

_____

_____

_____

_____

17. In summarizing your experiences with applying for a grant from the ESF Exploratory Workshop Scheme, could you imagine to apply again?

☐ Yes

☐ No, because:

_____

_____

D. Personal Background

18. Year of birth: _____

19. Gender:

- ☐ Female
- ☐ Male

20. Country of work: _____

21. In which type of organisation are you currently employed:

- ☐ University
- ☐ Research institute not directly related to a university
- ☐ Business or industry
- ☐ Other, please specify: _____

22. At which stage of your research career are you currently?

- ☐ Doctoral candidate
- ☐ Early stage, i.e. postdoctoral scholar with up to five years of research experience after PhD
- ☐ Established researcher, i.e. scholar with five or more years of research experience after PhD

23. In which of the following scientific areas (according to the ESF systematic) have you submitted your proposal?

- ☐ Biomedical sciences
- ☐ Life, Earth and Environmental
- ☐ Physical and Engineering Sciences
- ☐ Humanities
- ☐ Social Sciences

24. Have you been involved in any of the ESF instruments, including successful or unsuccessful applications, prior to the application to ESF Exploratory Workshop Scheme in 2005 or 2006?

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes, I was involved in following ESF instruments:
  - ☐ Exploratory Workshops
  - ☐ Networks
  - ☐ ESF Research Networking Programmes
  - ☐ EUROCORES Programmes
  - ☐ ESF Research Conferences
  - ☐ Other, please specify: _____

Thank you very much for participating in this study

Survey of Applicants to ESF Research Networking Programmes Call for Proposals 2005 and 2006

Applicant's Survey Identification Number (SID):

A. Decision to Apply for an ESF Grant

1. How did you learn about the ESF Research Networking Programmes? (multiple reply possible)

- ☐ From the internet site of a research organisation of my own country
- ☐ From the internet site of the European Science Foundation (ESF)
- ☐ Directly from officers of national research organisations
- ☐ From a colleague/staff member at my institution
- ☐ ESF Leaflet of the Call for Proposals
- ☐ Advertisement of the Call for Proposals in scientific journals, i.e. *Nature* or *Lancet*
- ☐ Other, please specify: _____

2. How important were the following reasons for your decision to apply to the ESF Research Networking Programmes?

	Very important 1	2	3	4	Not important at all 5
The attractiveness of the funding scheme / the level of funds	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The range of activities supported by the programme	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Expectation of good chances of the proposal to be funded	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The scientific reputation of ESF instruments	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Other, please specify: _____	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

3. Have you taken into consideration to apply for funding for this particular project from another programme / another organisation

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes, I have thought to apply for funding from _____
- ☐ Yes, beside ESF I also applied for funding from _____

4. Did you get in contact with the ESF member organisation of your own country prior or after submission of the proposal?

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes, I have contacted the ESF member organisation of my own country for following reasons:
  - ☐ To get more information about the a la carte principle
  - ☐ To get more information about details of the funding scheme, application procedures etc.
  - ☐ To inform the ESF member organisation about my proposal
  - ☐ To clarify in advance the positive attitude of the ESF member organisation against the objectives of the proposal
  - ☐ Other reason(s), please specify: _____

B. Preparation and Submission of the Application

5. How satisfied were you with the information provided by the ESF Website (Call for proposal) on the following issues concerning the ESF Research Networking Programmes?

	Very satisfied 1	2	3	4	Not satisfied at all 5
The objectives of the ESF Research Networking Programmes Scheme	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The eligibility criteria	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The involvement of partners from non-ESF countries, e.g. USA, Japan, etc.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The level and scope of funding (activities for which the budget can be used for)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Guidelines for submission of proposals	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The procedures and criteria to be used in the assessment of applications	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The a la carte funding principle, i.e. the role which national research organisations plays (ESF member organisations) for funding of the proposed projects	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

6. During the preparation phase of your application, have you contacted the ESF Office to get additional information?

☐ No **--> go to Question 8**

☐ Yes, I contacted the ESF office to get information about the following issue(s) (please specify):

_____

_____

7. How satisfied were you with the following aspects concerning support and advice from the ESF Office?

	Very satisfied 1	2	3	4	Not satisfied at all 5
Finding the appropriate contact person within ESF	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Preciseness of information provided	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Promptness of handling requests and provision of information	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Friendliness and customer orientation of ESF staff members	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Accessibility of ESF staff members on the phone	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Other, please specify: _____	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

8. To what extent did you or your colleague in charge of the on-line submission of the proposal encounter difficulties with the web submission system of ESF?

	No problems at all 1	2	3	4	Significant problems 5	Don't know 6
Understanding of the instructions for single steps of the submission process.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Technical problems, e.g. imperfect transfer of data	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Other, please specify: _____	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

9. Do you think that a standardised application form (either paper or on-line) would have made it easier for you to prepare and submit the proposal?

☐ Yes

☐ Don't know

☐ No, because: _____

10. How do you rate the overall burden of preparing and submitting a proposal in the ESF Research Networking Programmes Scheme as compared to similar programmes?

Much higher 1	Higher 2	More or less the same 3	Lower 4	Much lower 5	Don't know 6
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

11. Do you have any further comments or suggestions for improvements of information and the application procedures for ESF Research Networking Programmes?

_____

_____

_____

C. Quality and Transparency of Assessment and Selection of Proposals

12. In which year did you apply for funding from the ESF Research Networking Programmes?

- ☐ 2005 Call for proposals
- ☐ 2006 Call for proposals

13. Please select the current stage of assessment of your proposal and tick the respective box:

- ☐ No information from ESF since the submission of the proposal **--> go to question 16**
- ☐ Receipt of acknowledgement that the proposal has been received by ESF **--> go to question 16**
- ☐ Receipt of information about the eligibility of the proposal **--> go to question 16**
- ☐ Receipt of the outcome of the assessment of the proposal by the ESF Standing Committee in my scientific area
- ☐ Receipt of the information that the proposal has been recommended to ESF member organisations for funding

14. Has your proposal finally been approved for funding?

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes

15. How satisfied were you with the summary of the ESF's assessment report on your proposal provided to you by ESF?

	Very satisfied 1	2	3	4	Not satisfied at all 5
Scientific quality of the assessment	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Transparency of reasons for the recommendation about funding	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Usefulness of the assessment report for the improvement of future proposals	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Other, please specify: _____	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

16. How would you assess the duration of the main phases from application to final decision?

	Too short 1	Appropriate 2	Too long 3	Don't know 4
Time between the launch and the closing of the call for proposals	☐	☐	☐	☐
Time between submission of the proposal and information about the outcome of the assessment by the ESF Standing Committees	☐	☐	☐	☐
Time between information about the assessment by the ESF Standing Committees and the final decision by the ESF Executive Board	☐	☐	☐	☐

17. Do you have any further comments on the proposal assessment and selection mechanisms, the funding decision or the a la carte principle?

_____

_____

18. In summarizing your experiences with applying for a grant from the ESF Research Networking Programmes, could you imagine to apply again?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No, because:

_____

_____

D. Personal Background

19. Year of birth: _____

20. Gender:

- ☐ Female
- ☐ Male

21. Country of work: _____

22. In which type of organisation are you currently employed:

- ☐ University
- ☐ Research institute not directly related to a university
- ☐ Business or industry
- ☐ Other, please specify: _____

23. At which stage of your research career are you currently?

- ☐ Doctoral candidate
- ☐ Early stage, i.e. postdoctoral scholar with up to five years of research experience after PhD
- ☐ Established researcher, i.e. scholar with five or more years of research experience after PhD

24. In which of the following scientific areas (according to the ESF systematic) have you submitted your proposal?

- ☐ Biomedical sciences
- ☐ Life, Earth and Environmental
- ☐ Physical and Engineering Sciences
- ☐ Humanities
- ☐ Social Sciences

25. Have you been involved in any of the ESF instruments, including successful or unsuccessful applications, prior to the application to ESF Research Networking Programmes in 2005 or 2006?

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes, I was involved in following ESF instruments:
  - ☐ Exploratory Workshops
  - ☐ Networks
  - ☐ ESF Research Networking Programmes
  - ☐ EUROCORES Programmes
  - ☐ ESF Research Conferences
  - ☐ Other, please specify: _____

Thank you very much for participating in this study

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