



Kristin Tessmar-Raible (right) and PhD student Juliane Zantke work on how lunar cycles affect the activity of worms.

Compelling and intelligible writing make a difference when reviewers flooded with applications are trying to make their choice — and honest feedback from colleagues can really help, says Kristin Tessmar-Raible, a neurobiologist at the University of Vienna in Austria. Tessmar-Raible was awarded a Starting Grant in 2013 for investigating how the waxing and waning of the Moon governs animals' monthly inner clocks. The wording of the headline and sentences and the order of paragraphs and tables can be vastly improved by input from friends, colleagues and professional proofreaders, who can all offer tips on how to make a synopsis catchy and a full proposal concise and well-structured, she says. In addition, national ERC help desks in all EU countries offer grant-writing assistance, and some also offer interview-training courses.

Less is often more. "Avoid unnecessary information in a CV that might only conceal the things that really matter," says Ricci. Likewise, he says, presentations that are padded with data and technical details tend to be more confusing than informative. "You have only ten minutes to describe your grand vision and ambition," says Tessmar-Raible. "Every second counts, so you have to think hard about every word and every slide that you use."

Applicants should also carefully consider which of the ERC's 25 panels they would like to evaluate their proposal. "If you end up

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being reviewed by the 'wrong' panel it might diminish your chance of getting funded," says Erik Garnett, a physical chemist at the Institute for Atomic and Molecular Physics in Amsterdam. Garnett had moved there in 2012 from Stanford University in California with little knowledge of the funding situation in Europe. On the advice of the director of his new institute, he applied for a Starting Grant to develop nanomaterials that can be used to make high-efficiency solar cells — his first grant proposal ever — and succeeded. Before he submitted his application, he looked up the CVs of panel members of previous calls to get a feel for whether their expertise overlapped with his research. He opted for the Material and Synthesis panel because its members seemed to have more affinity for his work than did others.

Starting grants could well galvanize researchers' careers, says Huvenne. She herself is a good example: last summer, two years after her ERC-funded project launched, she was promoted from senior research fellow to team leader for the seafloor and habitat mapping group at her institution. She was surprised by how many scientists have since got seriously interested in her research.

And in Italy, universities can hire Starting-Grant winners without following the country's historically twisted routes to academic appointment. Winning an ERC grant provided Ricci a springboard to a permanent position. Twelve months after his second return from Brussels, he was promoted to associate professor. ■

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CAREER PROGRESSION

Europe on track

Tenure is gaining traction in Europe even as the system is slipping away in the United States, according to a study by the League of European Research Universities in Leuven, Belgium. The study surveyed 21 universities throughout Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, Spain and the United Kingdom. It found that seven nations are now using tenure as a way to recruit internationally and to offer researchers a clearer career path. The paper defines tenure-track as a fixed-term contract that can lead to a permanent position. Institutions surveyed in the United Kingdom, France and Spain do not have tenure systems. Meanwhile, the proportion of tenure-track positions in the United States has declined in the past 30 years, notes the study.

EDUCATION

Degrees of difference

Fewer than one-quarter of people aged 25–64 in the 34 member nations of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) earned a degree in 2012, finds an OECD report.

Education at a Glance 2014: OECD Indicators examined education attained by adults in Europe, North America, South America and Asia. The report found that at least one-third of adults aged 25–64 in the United States, Norway and Israel had earned a degree. Chile and Austria had the lowest rates at 12% and 13%, respectively. Other nations fell between these rates. The average age for completing a doctoral research programme across the member nations was 35. Korea reported the oldest age of 40; Germany the youngest at 31.

RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

Falls in funding

US federal spending on scientific research and development is projected to have fallen by 4% from 2011 by the end of this year, according to a report from the US National Science Foundation (NSF) in Arlington, Virginia. The report, which collected data from the 27 US science-funding agencies, shows that spending reached US\$140 billion in 2011 and is expected to slip to \$134 billion this year. The 2014 total is likely to be even lower, says an NSF spokesperson, because it does not account for a 2013 across-the-board cut to discretionary spending.