

## Centres Competition 2020 Frequently Asked Questions

Updated Aug 2020

Details about the 2020 Centres Competition, including the call specification and Je-S guidance notes for applicants, can be found on the ESRC website: <https://esrc.ukri.org/funding/funding-opportunities/centres-competition-2020>. Please refer to those documents in the first instance for all queries.

This document may be updated to reflect the questions most frequently raised with the ESRC. It is highly recommended that potential applicants review the online version of this document on our website (rather than a saved or cached version) before contacting us for advice.

### Eligibility

#### **Does the lead research organisation have to be based in the UK?**

Yes, the principal investigator (PI) must be based at an eligible UK university or independent research organisation. A complete list of eligible research organisations to hold ESRC grants can be found on the UKRI website: <https://www.ukri.org/funding/how-to-apply/eligibility/> Proposals can be submitted by researchers who are not established members of the proposed host institution. In these circumstances, by submitting the proposal, the research organisation (RO) is confirming that, in the event of an award, they guarantee to provide facilities for the PI (as if they were an established member of staff) for the duration of the award.

#### **Is there a limit on the number of proposals my research organisation is permitted to submit as lead RO? How do I find out?**

We anticipate considerable interest in the 2020 Centres competition. Our intention is to allocate up to five awards through the competition. It is important that we manage demand to give applicants a realistic chance of success and minimise the effort invested in preparing, submitting and reviewing unsuccessful applications. For this reason the competition will be run as a two-stage application process to support realistic success rates at full stage. As in the previous Centres competition, we have again decided to limit the number of applications per institution and ask research organisations to support only the most competitive bids. This is also to ensure that the call does not become onerous for the research community and that success rates are reasonable.

In March 2020, the research offices at higher education research organisations were informed via email of how many proposals they can submit to the competition. Existing ESRC Centres in a position to take up funding within a year of the funding decision are eligible to apply, over and above this institutional allocation, a list of those eligible is available on the ESRC website: <https://esrc.ukri.org/funding/funding-opportunities/centres-competition-2020>. The applications from these existing Centres will be treated the same as any other application and will not be advantaged or disadvantaged in any way. Furthermore, applications to the highlight notice will not count towards the demand management allocations.

Please contact your organisation's Research Office for further details.

Unless notified otherwise, independent ROs applying to the competition should assume they can submit one application.

### **Can PIs and Co-Is be based in different institutions? / Can several ROs be involved in an application?**

The centre structure should be shaped to suit the aims and expertise of the centre. The PI should be located at the submitting research organisation. Co-investigators, however, can be based in multiple research organisations. The management plan should outline how these relationships will be managed. Applicants should request the level of resources that are required and appropriate for the research, within the expectations of the call, and all co-investigators must make a significant contribution to the conduct of the research. Very small fractions of co-investigator time should be avoided.

### **Can a PI or Co-I be included in more than one proposal?**

We do not restrict the number of applications that an individual can act as Principal Investigator or Co-investigator, so long as that individual is not over-committing their time (breaching our funding rules) if all applications on which they have been included in are successful. However, in practice we would not anticipate any one individual acting as a PI on more than one proposal.

### **Can researchers based in institutions outside the UK be included in the proposal?**

International academic researchers from established overseas research organisations of comparable standing to ESRC-eligible UK research organisations are eligible to apply as an international co-investigator (Co-I) under the scheme. Please refer to the specific ESRC International Co-Investigator policy [www.esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-applicants/inclusion-of-international-co-investigators-on-proposals/](http://www.esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-applicants/inclusion-of-international-co-investigators-on-proposals/)

International collaboration is not limited to co-investigators but may also involve partnerships to develop international datasets, promote knowledge exchange and international impact, and enhance social science conceptual development on an international scale.

### **Can third sector, business and government body co-investigators be included?**

ESRC welcome inter-institutional applications and strongly encourage partnerships with non-HEI organisations. Business, third sector and government co-investigators can be included

under standard ESRC policy [www.esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-applicants/inclusion-of-uk-business-third-sector-or-government-body-co-investigators-on-proposals/](http://www.esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-applicants/inclusion-of-uk-business-third-sector-or-government-body-co-investigators-on-proposals/).

However, the combined costs of international, business, third sector or government body co-investigators must not exceed 30% of the full 100% full Economic Cost (fEC) of the grant.

### **Can I include a non-higher education partner on the proposal?**

ESRC welcomes proposals with co-funding or contributions in kind from project partners beyond the RO, although this is not a requirement. We would expect evidence that partners had been involved in project design and engaged in impact activities outlined in the proposal where appropriate. If a project partner intends to co-fund at Outline stage the proposal should provide an indication of the co-funding potential. A letter of support will be required if invited to submit a full proposal. This can include cash contributions or in-kind resources if applicable. Please see 'Project Partner' section in the funding guide:

<https://esrc.ukri.org/files/funding/guidance-for-applicants/research-funding-guide/>

### **Can early career researchers (ECRs) be included in applications?**

ESRC would encourage centre proposals to include the participation of early career researchers as co-investigators. For definition and eligibility of early career researchers as co-investigators please refer to this link: [www.esrc.ukri.org/skills-and-careers/postgraduate-careers/early-career-researchers/](http://www.esrc.ukri.org/skills-and-careers/postgraduate-careers/early-career-researchers/)

### **My proposal overlaps with an investment currently funded by the ESRC. Can I still apply?**

Successful proposals must clearly demonstrate how they add value to the current portfolio of ESRC investments. Proposals which substantially overlap with or duplicate existing Centres or large grants are unlikely to be successful.

## **Application and assessment**

### **How and when should I apply?**

The competition will be run as a two-stage application process. Outline proposals should be submitted through the ESRC Joint Electronic Submission (Je-S) system, **no later than 16.00 on 6 October 2020. In November 2020** shortlisted applicants will be invited to submit full proposals by 9 March 2021 of which a shortlist will then be invited to interview during summer 2021. Funding decisions will be announced in July 2021 with projects starting from 1 October 2021

### **Are there any thematic priorities to this call?**

This call will include a highlight notice in the area of Changing Populations, in particular 'Connecting Generations'. We also welcome applications of excellent quality in any area of social science within ESRC's remit. Please refer to the list of research areas that fall within

ESRC remit (<https://esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-applicants/is-my-research-suitable-for-esrc-funding/discipline-classifications/>) for further information.

### **How do I identify that my proposal is to be considered under the highlight notice?**

The title of your proposal **MUST** be prefaced with the word 'Highlight'. If your proposal is not identified in this way it will be considered as part of the open call only.

### **How will interdisciplinary research be peer reviewed if proposed?**

ESRC welcomes interdisciplinary proposals, although this is not a requirement for the 2020 Centres competition. We recognise the challenges for interdisciplinary proposals in peer review. For all proposals received, we will endeavour to ensure that a breadth of reviewers, including those with interdisciplinary expertise, are engaged in assessing quality across the disciplines concerned.

### **Successful proposals must add value to the current portfolio of ESRC Centres. How can I check if my proposal duplicates an existing ESRC Centre?**

If you wish to explore whether there is any risk that your proposal will appear to the panel to duplicate an existing investment in area of research, and approach, you can check the scope of other ESRC Centres at <https://esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-large-investments/esrc-centres-and-institutes/>

### **What level of institutional support is required?**

As in previous Centres Competitions, ESRC will be looking for evidence of long-term institutional commitment, both strategic and financial, to the proposed Centre through the provision of grant-associated parallel activities and capacity-building. Our current funding model expects the host RO to contribute a minimum amount to demonstrate the ESRC/RO joint strategic commitment to the centre over the longer term. We recognise that the Centre competition grant already requires a RO contribution of 20% (as ESRC funds 80% of the full economic costs of the proposal) and would encourage ROs to offer commitments appropriate to their plans for the Centre.

Outline proposals must include an Institutional Letter of Support from the Pro-Vice chancellor of research (or equivalent role) from the lead organisation that confirms the RO's (and any Partner ROs') commitment to the Centre application. Assessment of institutional support will not form a critical part of the assessment of the outline bids and further guidance will be provided to Centres that are shortlisted for full proposals.

Further information about the Centres funding model is available on the ESRC website: [www.esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-large-investments/esrc-centres-and-institutes/](http://www.esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-large-investments/esrc-centres-and-institutes/)

Please see below for extra questions as at Aug 2020

### **How should impact be evidenced in my proposal?**

Evidence of impact should be threaded throughout your proposal and in the case for support in particular. Please consider and address the following:

- Clear mapping of beneficiaries and target audiences
- Analysis of demand for research outputs
- Strategy for engagement with target audiences
- Methods for communication and engagement
- Opportunities for collaboration
- Monitoring and evaluation of impact plan activities.

To be effective, all communication, engagement and impact activities must be planned in detail and properly resourced. To this end it is recommended that **approximately 10% of the overall budget** should be dedicated to deliver impact activities.

Guidance on developing impact-generating activities is available in the ESRC's impact toolkit: [www.esrc.ukri.org/research/impact-toolkit](http://www.esrc.ukri.org/research/impact-toolkit)

ESRC impact case studies are also available: [www.esrc.ukri.org/impact](http://www.esrc.ukri.org/impact)

## **Additional FAQ's for Highlight Notice**

### **Is there a ring-fenced budget for the highlight notice?**

Yes. £10 million (100% fEC) has been set aside for the highlight notice. ESRC will meet 80% of fEC for the proposal that is funded.

### **Is there an expectation that the Centre funded under the highlight notice will request the full £10 million available or is it possible to apply for a lower-value Centre?**

We anticipate that to achieve the ambition set out in the highlight notice, applicants are likely to apply for funds towards the upper limit of the £10 million available for this Centre.

### **The highlight notice sets out the scope of the Centre including descriptions of the research that is needed. Can my proposal go beyond the descriptions that are given?**

We expect that the successful Centre will undertake research in line with the scope set out in the highlight notice. However, applicants should not feel restricted by the descriptions that are given and can expand beyond what is set out.

### **Is it possible for a Centre that is applying to the main competition with a proposal that falls outside the scope of the highlight notice to still address some of the research topics and questions set out in the highlight notice?**

An application can be submitted to the main competition that might have some relevance to the highlight notice but predominantly focuses on other research areas. In that case, the application will be assessed alongside the proposals submitted to the main competition and not the highlight notice. Applications submitting to the highlight notice must clearly prefix the title of their centre with “Highlight”.

**We understand that there is demand management in relation to the Centres competition but how does it apply to the highlight notice? Does a highlight notice application count towards an ROs allocation of applications or in addition to this?**

An application to the highlight notice will be considered in addition to each ROs demand management allocation. As in the previous Centres competition, we have again decided to limit the number of applications per institution and ask research organisations to support only the most competitive bids.

**Will there be different assessment criteria for applications to the highlight notice?**

In addition to the standard assessment criteria for the main competition, applications submitted to the highlight notice will be assessed on the extent to which their proposal fits the scope of the highlight as set out in Annex I of the call specification.

**Will there be a separate assessment Panel for the highlight notice?**

This will be decided once we understand the number of proposals that are likely to be submitted to the highlight. Our priority is to ensure fair and robust assessment of the proposals.

## **Additional FAQs for Institutional Support**

ESRC recognises the pressures that some ROs are currently facing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This statement, which applies to the ESRC Centres competition 2020, aims to make the requirements regarding RO contributions clear for the applicant community.

There is no requirement for a minimum financial commitment from an RO in order to apply to the **outline** stage of the 2020 ESRC Centres competition and RO financial contributions will not form part of the assessment at the outline stage. However, Centres are major strategic investments for the ESRC and an RO’s strategic commitment to the centre over the longer term should be demonstrated as part of the application.

For those Centres shortlisted to apply to the **full** stage we will expect ROs to demonstrate their long term strategic commitment to the centre through financial or other contributions and we are committed to ensuring that we request these in a way that is sustainable for ROs and ensures a level playing field for assessment. ROs have a degree of flexibility in what forms

of support they provide and how these are profiled over the lifetime of the centre. For example, commitments could come on stream later on in the lifetime of the centre or ramp up over time. Further guidance will be provided at the full proposal stage. Assessment of RO contributions will be part of the assessment of the proposals at the full proposal stage and clear guidance will be given to our panel.

**Why have you not lifted the requirements for matched funding completely?**

The ESRC's Centres policy expects ROs to demonstrate their long term strategic commitment to Centres at their institution. This has not changed but we do recognise the challenges that ROs are currently facing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our approach for this year's competition is aimed at relieving immediate financial pressures where necessary and enabling ROs to plan their support for the Centre over its lifetime in a sustainable way. Centres funded through this competition will not start until October 2021 and this will provide opportunities for ROs to plan over the next 6+ years in the case of a 5 year Centre.

**What do you mean by 'strategic commitment to the Centre over the longer term should be demonstrated'?**

We expect applications to demonstrate strong endorsement from the host RO, evidencing how the Centre will be central to the RO's research strategy and providing assurance of the support for not only the duration of the ESRC grant, but also subsequent phases of Transition and Legacy funding, and facilitating future self-sustainability.

**Can you give an example of what an in-kind contribution may be?**

Non-financial or 'in-kind' contributions could include providing good quality accommodation or redirecting existing planned studentships to centre-linked studentships. The exact nature of the contribution should be appropriate to the application, and applicants should tailor this accordingly.

**What criteria will be used for the assessment process?**

RO financial and in-kind contributions will not form part of the assessment process at the outline stage. Shortlisted applicants will be given full guidance on how to reflect these contributions in the full Centre bid.

**Will this apply to existing Centres?**

No, this is not a retrospective change for existing Centres but a way to help support ROs with new bids to the Centres competition. Other measures have been announced by UKRI to

support existing grants, including the Covid-19 Extension Allocation and flexibility to request no-cost extensions.

**Will it be detrimental at assessment if we have commitments come on stream later in the lifetime of the Centre as opposed to ramping up over time?**

The assessment process at the outline stage will not include the RO contributions, therefore applicants can choose how the contributions come on stream to best suit their project. Shortlisted applicants will be given full guidance on how to reflect these contributions in the full Centre bid.

**What if we've already got agreement for extra contributions from our RO, should we now remove them from the application or change how they are utilised in the project?**

We wouldn't want to discourage the RO from providing the extra support if they are in a position to do so from the outset of the project.