

## S&E Regional Operational Programme 2014 – 2020.

### Implementation Plan: SFI Research Centres.

<b>Operational Programme</b>	S&E Regional Operational Programme 2014-2020
<b>Priority</b>	1: Strengthening RTDI in the S&E Region
<b>Thematic Objective</b>	1: Strengthening Research, Technological Development and Innovation
<b>Investment Priority</b>	(a) enhancing research and innovation (R&I) infrastructure and capacities to develop R&I excellence, and promoting centres of competence, in particular those of European interest.
<b>Scheme</b>	SFI Research Centres
<b>Categorisation Code</b>	060
<b>ERDF Certifying Body</b>	Department of Public Expenditure and Reform
<b>Managing Authority</b>	Southern Regional Assembly
<b>Intermediate Body</b>	Science Foundation Ireland
<b>Beneficiary</b>	Higher Education Institutes
<b>Grant Rate</b>	100%
<b>EU Co-Financing Rate</b>	50% of public eligible expenditure declared

### Objectives of Intervention.

The objective of the Research Centres Programme is to develop a set of world-leading, large-scale research centres aligned with the 14 priority areas of research identified in the Research Prioritisation Exercise that will provide major economic impact for Ireland.

### Description of Intervention.

SFI Research Centres link scientists and engineers in partnerships across academia and industry to address crucial research questions; foster the development of new and existing Irish-based technology companies; attract industry that could make an important contribution to Ireland and its economy; attract international research talent and capital; attract, anchor and spin out related companies in Ireland; and increase the numbers of SFI-trained researchers employed in industry. All of the approved research centre proposals will be aligned with the 14 priorities identified in Ireland's Research Prioritisation Exercise.

The Research Centres are structured on a hub and spoke model consisting of a number of targeted projects undertaken in partnership with industry that

connect into a central hub containing the platform research (specified research activity in the approved work programme) and core operations (payroll and other operational costs). A key feature of SFI Research Centres is the creation of a critical mass of internationally leading researchers in strategic areas which become a key attractant to industry and lay the foundation for effective and productive academic and industrial partnerships. The Research Centres provide the foundation for sustainable research activity which can take place in conjunction with Industry Partners and other funding agencies such as EU by leveraging against the core SFI funding, with the objective to meet the changing needs of industry and society.

SFI Research Centres envisage evolving to maximise capabilities, outputs and industry offerings including the transfer of knowledge and expertise to enterprises and the spin-out of new, high-technology start-up companies that have the potential to raise external angel or venture funding.

The SFI Research Centre programme will contribute to the specific objective of the investment priority by increasing the level of strategic research taking place in the S&E region, aligned with the Research Prioritisation Exercise, with strong industrial linkages and will also promote eco-innovation, where relevant.

Industry partners are expected to contribute 30% of the cost of research activities in Strategic Research Centres. This relatively high industry cost-share component reflects the importance of the programme to industry and to ensure maximum impact on growth and jobs. The co-funded expenditure does not include infrastructure.

## **Responsibilities of Intermediary Body.**

Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) will enter into an Administrative Agreement with the Regional Assembly which will set out in detail the responsibilities of each body. This agreement will be drafted initially by the Regional Assembly in consultation with SFI and the Office of Science, Technology and Innovation at the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation. SFI will be responsible for ensuring the effective implementation of the intervention and for full compliance with the Regulations, particularly those concerning financial management, control, publicity and public procurement. SFI commits to revising its EU Structural Funds Procedures Manual to comply with the requirements of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform Circular on the management of EU co-funded programmes 2014- 20; and the EU regulations.

SFI will ensure that the beneficiary HEIs are provided with a grant award document (Letter of Offer) setting out the conditions of support for each operation, including the specific requirements concerning the products or services to be

delivered under the operation, the financing plan, the time limit for execution and the conditions for use of the Structural Funds IT System 2014-2020.

SFI will be responsible for the drawdown of funding from DJEI and for the processing and authorisation of grant awards to the HEIs

SFI will be responsible for ensuring that all payment claims for European Structural and Investment Fund expenditure, submitted by the relevant Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), are supported by receipted invoices and audit documents, and that a clear and sufficient audit trail exists. Verification checks will be carried out by SFI and/or by other bodies on their behalf on the claims submitted and on the management and control systems in the HEIs. These checks will include procedures to verify the delivery of the research projects co-financed and the reality of expenditure claimed and compliance with applicable national and Community rules on, in particular, the eligibility of expenditure for support and public procurement.

SFI will also be responsible for ensuring in respect of co-financed Intervention/projects, that only eligible expenditure actually incurred is submitted to the Managing Authority. SFI is responsible for the certification of all expenditure incurred by the HEIs.

SFI will be responsible for submitting eligible expenditure in the format required by the Certifying Authority to the Regional Assembly (Managing Authority) in order for payment claims to be prepared for submission to the Certifying Authority. Project level data will be updated, as and when requested and specified, by the EU Structural Funds I.T. System.

SFI will compile monitoring/progress reports as requested by the Regional Assembly and cooperate with OP level evaluations as required. These reports will provide data on the integration of the Horizontal Principles following a screening exercise to be undertaken by SFI.

The contribution of the Irish exchequer and the European Structural and Investment Funds 2014-2020 will be acknowledged in all promotional material, annual reports, research laboratories and websites relevant to the co-funded awards, by use of appropriate logo and text references. SFI will ensure that the HEIs as beneficiaries comply with publicity requirements.

## **Responsibilities of Beneficiary Body.**

The HEIs will be responsible for implementation of the intervention at local level. As the final beneficiaries in the cascade of reporting, they will be responsible for ensuring that only actual eligible expenditure incurred, and expenditure which comes under the terms of the research project(s) as approved, is certified. They will be required to ensure a clear audit trail exists in relation to EU co-funded expenditure and that all claims are supported by receipted invoices or, where this cannot be done, by accounting documents of equivalent probative value.

Finally, they are responsible for ensuring that all Annex III data is recorded on an appropriate system as required by Article 125, 2, (d)

## **Integration of Horizontal Principles.**

SFI is committed to removing and mitigating any existing or perceived factors that may limit the participation of women in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) careers, and to redressing the gender imbalance amongst SFI award holders, of which 19% are female (Source: SFI Census 2012). One of SFI's Agenda 2020 KPI targets is to increase the proportion of female award holders to 25% by 2020. The aim in attaining this target is to facilitate the retention of excellent female researchers within academia.

To this end, SFI will focus on streamlining gender initiatives across all its programmes by providing supporting schemes and measures that can facilitate the retention, re-entry, retraining and career advancement of women in STEM research as follows:

- Advance Award/Industry Fellowships
- SFI Maternity/Adoptive Policy
- Flexible eligibility criteria for the Investigators programme under the SFI Investigator Career Advancement (ICA) criteria, whose aim is to support those researchers returning to academic research after a prolonged absence e.g. Statutory adoptive leave and Statutory parental leave
- Promotes other Non-SFI gender initiatives i.e. Athena Swan Charter.

SFI will track the participation of women in Research on an Annual basis through the Annual Census, both at an award holder level and as part of the Research team. SFI will track the level of funding in the Environmental Science and Energy space over the period 2014 - 2020 - However it must be stressed only funded proposals in these areas which demonstrate excellent science will be funded.

## **Research Centre Programme Call 2013 (Appendix 1)**

### **Selection Process and Criteria.**

There are open calls run for researchers in eligible Research Bodies, which generally have fixed deadlines. All submissions are subjected to competitive,

international merit review processes carried out by a panel of leading experts who make recommendations to SFI Executive, or SFI Board as appropriate, who make the final decision on awards. The 2013 Research Centres Programme call will follow three stages:

**Pre-Proposal stage** - submit a pre-proposal application to the call which must provide a proposal title and abstract (max. 200 words).

Each pre-proposal will be reviewed by a panel of scientific and commercialisation experts who will evaluate both the scientific merit of each pre-proposal and its potential to deliver significant economic and societal impact. The proposals will be evaluated as follows,

1. Quality of the applicant team (weighting of 25%)
2. Quality of the proposed research programme (weighting of 25%)
3. Quality of the potential for economic and societal impact (weighting of 50%)

Only those pre- proposals that are deemed to be excellent both in terms of science and potential for delivering economic and societal impact to Ireland will progress to the full proposal application stage. Pre-proposals deemed not to have met the required level of scientific excellence and potential for impact will be eliminated from the evaluation process.

**Full Proposal stage** - Full proposals will be sent for postal review. For each proposal under evaluation, SFI will solicit between five and seven written reviews (i.e., postal review) from international topic experts who will appraise the quality of the applicant team and proposed research programme. Proposals were evaluated for scientific excellence based on the following criteria:

- *Quality, significance, and relevance of the recent research record of the lead and co-applicants and the strength and cohesiveness of the applicant group, including likely synergy in delivering research and potential for international leadership*
- *Quality, significance, and relevance of the proposed research, including value for money and the potential to advance knowledge and understanding within its own field or across different fields.*
- *Quality of plans for execution and delivery of the research programme and Centre goals, including the appropriateness of the proposed milestones and deliverables.*

Each of the sections above was scored on a scale of 1-5 according to the standard score descriptions used within Sesame for assessing the quality of the applicant and research programme. New descriptions were added for rating the quality of the plans for execution and delivery whereby a score of 1 signified that the plans suffered from serious deficiencies and the Centre goals could not be delivered. A score of 5 was assigned for outstanding plans.

Applicants will be provided with the anonymised postal reviews and will be invited to provide a brief written response to these reviews (i.e. applicant response). Based on the evaluations submitted by the postal reviewers and the applicant responses, SFI will select the proposals that have demonstrated a high-level of scientific excellence to progress to the Impact Panel assessment stage. Proposals not selected for the final Impact Panel meeting will be eliminated from the evaluation process.

**Impact Panel Presentation** - The Impact Panel will comprise high-level members, such as Vice Presidents of Research from universities, corporate R&D Directors, partners from the investment and venture capital communities and entrepreneurs. . The Impact Panel will be tasked with identifying fundable proposals and will provide SFI with a list of such proposals ranked in order of priority for funding. Scores (1-5) were assigned to each proposal based on the following evaluation criteria:

- *Quality, significance, and relevance of the recent research record of the lead and co-applicants and the strength and cohesiveness of the applicant group, including likely synergy in delivering research and potential for international leadership*
- *Quality, significance, and relevance of the proposed research's potential contribution to demonstrably support and underpin enterprise competitiveness and societal development in Ireland*
- *Quality of plans for execution and delivery of the research programme and Centre goals, including the appropriateness of the proposed milestones and deliverables*

The ranked list of fundable proposals will inform the final decision as to which Research Centre proposals are to be funded by SFI Executive Committee and SFI Board.

The Research Centres eligible for ERDF funding in the 2014 - 2020 Operational Programme were awarded following the 2013 Research Centres Call (Appendix 1). This Call operated on a themed basis and focused on a number of areas which could generate significant economic and societal benefit for Ireland. The themes that were selected were aligned to National Research Prioritisation (NRP) areas identified by the National Research Prioritisation Exercise which was implemented as government policy in 2012. The themes for the 2013 SFI Research Centres Call were:

- Future Networks and Communications (Priority Area A)
- Digital Platforms, Content and Applications (Priority Area C)
- Medical Devices (Priority Area E)

- Diagnostics (Priority Area F)
- Sustainable Food Production and Processing (Priority Area I)
- Smart Grids and Smart Cities (Priority Area K)
- Manufacturing Competitiveness (Priority Area L)
- Software (Platform science & technology)
- Geosciences Underpinning Sustainable Economic Development
- Earth and Ocean Observation

In addition to the requirement for scientific excellence, applications considered under the 2013 SFI Research Centres Call needed to clearly demonstrate potential for economic and societal impact to Ireland, and this was required at both pre-proposal and full proposal stages.

The following is extracted from the 2013 Call document and sets out the selection and evaluation criteria as follows:

#### Eligibility Criteria of the Applicant and Co-applicants

Applicant groups must have one lead applicant and between two and nine co-applicants. SFI expects that the group of lead and co-applicants will form the executive management committee of the Research Centre, with administrative responsibility for the performance of the centre.

The lead applicant (and co-applicants) must be members of the academic staff of an eligible Research Body (permanent or with a contract that covers the period of the grant). Funded investigators must hold a PhD or equivalent for at least 3 years by the pre-proposal deadline. Funded Research Centres for any future calls will also be included in the Operational Programme.

## **Appeals.**

SFI has a formal Appeals Process which is published on the SFI Website.

### 1. Introduction

This policy establishes procedures and responsibilities for the appeal of the declination of a proposal by SFI. In making its decision regarding funding, SFI takes into account the peer review assessments of the scientific and technical merits of a proposal, but also the value to Ireland of the research programme, the budget availability and programmatic priorities of the Foundation. Proposals are evaluated in open competitions via a combination of international peer review and strategic fit with SFI's mission. In addition to the principles espoused by SFI's core values, SFI uses the following principles in reaching its funding decisions: value for money, strategic impact, efficient use of the peer review system, internationalisation, critical mass, cohesion with other funding streams, and availability of funding.

The primary aim of the SFI appeals procedure is to ensure that SFI's review process itself has been fair and reasonable and that SFI's stated review procedures were followed. Although the appeal procedure is not a peer review process itself and will not re-open such a peer review process, it may address procedural errors in the peer review process, or other aspects of proposal review including: unaccounted-for conflicts of interest, inappropriate consideration of rumour / hearsay, or incomplete / inconsistent documentation being made available to the reviewers. SFI would like to emphasise that in all such cases a robust argument must be articulated and that the appeal will subsequently follow the specific procedures outlined in section 2.

It is appreciated that applicants may, from time to time, disagree with the detailed technical perspective of the expert referee, or their position on the overall quality or impact of the proposed research. However, SFI has full confidence in the high quality of experts that it engages in the peer review process and takes the position that this source of expert input allows SFI to make the best and most informed decisions. The judgment, interpretation, or level of understanding of these experts is, therefore, not grounds for appeal.

SFI now has in place a formal process integrated into some of its programmes, whereby applicants are invited to provide a scientific response. In programmes where this response stage does not form part of the SFI review process, an appeal may be accepted where specific factual inaccuracies can be clearly identified. Otherwise, appeals must be limited to clearly identifiable issues of procedure. The process required for invoking the formal process of appeal is outlined in detail in section 2.

Regarding appeals made prior to full technical peer review of a proposal; SFI remains confident that the procedures for submission of Eols, pre-proposals and full proposals are clearly delineated in the call documentation and that it remains the responsibility of the applicant to ensure that these are followed correctly. For this reason, appeals based on applications that have been deemed administratively ineligible, including, but not restricted to, late applications, applications exceeding page limits or missing documentation, will not be considered unless it can be explicitly demonstrated that this resulted from an oversight by SFI.

Appeals based on funding levels, or award conditions on applications that have been approved for funding, will not be considered. Award of SFI funding is discretionary and the appeal process is not an adversarial one. A formal hearing, therefore, is not provided. Factors such as programme budgets and priorities will have to be taken into account when making a decision on an appeal.

## 2. Procedures

The appeal process at SFI has three stages:



*(A) EXPLANATION BY THE SFI PROGRAMME MANAGER OR SCIENTIFIC DIRECTOR.* An applicant whose proposal has been declined is encouraged to request more information from the cognizant SFI Programme Manager, over and above the explanatory materials received with the declination notice. The Programme Manager will afford the applicant an opportunity to present his/her point of view, will provide additional information if any exists, and will take any further action that seems appropriate in consultation with the relevant SFI Scientific Director.

*(B) REVIEW OF THE APPEAL BY AN SFI DIRECTOR NOT INVOLVED IN THE ORIGINAL REVIEW.*

If dissatisfied with the explanation or action provided under Section (a), the applicant may submit a written request to the Secretary to the SFI Board that SFI reconsider its decision. SFI will consider such a request only if the applicant has first sought and obtained an explanation under the procedures described in Section (a), only if the request is received by SFI within 30 days after the date of the declination notice, and provided that the applicant's request for an appeal has been sent through the research office of the applicant's host Research Body and is endorsed by the host Research Body (VP for research or equivalent). In the letter requesting the appeal, the applicant should state whether the appeal is based on a) factual inaccuracy (only applicable to awards that do not already include a rebuttal process) or b) procedural error. The applicant should also provide a concise written statement (no more than 300 words) clearly explaining the grounds for the appeal. The Secretary to the Board will forward the request to a Director at SFI who was not involved in the original review of the proposal. This Director will reconsider the record to determine whether SFI's review of the declined proposal was fair and reasonable. The Director may personally conduct the review or may designate a Programme Manager in his/her Programme area, who had no part in the initial review, to do so.

Within 30 days after the date of the request, the Director will provide the results of the appeal, in writing, to the research office of the host Research Body with a copy to the applicant. If the results cannot be furnished within 30 days, the allocated Director will give the host Research Body and the applicant a written explanation of the need for more time, indicating the date when results can be expected.

*(C) ) FURTHER REVIEW BY THE DIRECTOR GENERAL AT THE REQUEST OF THE HOST RESEARCH BODY.*

Within 30 days after the Director has notified the applicant of the results of the appeal, the host Research Body may request further review by the Director General of SFI.

The request need not be in any particular format, but it must be in writing and must be signed by the President/Provost/Chief Executive Officer of the host Research Body and by the PI. The request should explain why the host Research

Body still believes that an error may have occurred in the initial evaluation and why it is not satisfied with the review of the original appeal conducted by the Director under the procedures described in Section (b), above.

The Director General is responsible for reviewing the request for a further appeal and the record of earlier SFI actions (including the original review of the proposal and the review conducted under Section (b)). The Director General may personally conduct the further review or may designate another SFI official, who had no part in the original review or the review conducted under Section (b), to do so. Additionally, an external third party expert(s) may be asked to examine the case and to present a recommendation. Within 30 days after a request for further appeal is received at SFI, the Director General will furnish the results of the further appeal, in writing, to the host Research Body. If results cannot be furnished within 30 days, the Director General will provide the host Research Body with a written explanation of the need for more time, indicating the date when the results can be expected. *THE DECISION MADE BY THE DIRECTOR GENERAL IS FINAL*

## Performance Indicators.

### Priority-level Output Indicators Investment Priority 1(a)

ID	Indicator	Measurement Unit	Fund	Category of Region	Target Value	Source of Data	Frequency of Reporting
CO 24	Number of new researchers in supported entities	Full-Time Equivalents	ERDF	More Developed	689	SFI	Annual

### Programme-Specific Result Indicators Investment Priority 1(a)

ID	Indicator	Measurement Unit	Category of Region	Baseline Value	Baseline Year	Target Value	Source of Data	Frequency of Reporting
1(a)	Increased number of industry partners engaged with funded strategic research centres in	No. of enterprises	More Developed	529	2014	713	SFI	Annual

## Financial Management.

Funding for SFI is provided by Central Government, and will be maintained under a separate Sub-head to be provided by the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (DJEI), on an annual basis to SFI.

The “Finance and Operations” Unit of SFI will allocate funding on an instalment basis to the HEIs over the duration of the award. Such allocations will be made in line with the SFI awards selection criteria relevant to the specific programme and as detailed in the formal SFI “Letter of Offer” relating to the specific research award.

SFI will enter into an Administrative Agreement with the Regional Assembly which will set out in detail the responsibilities at each level in respect of financial management and control. SFI will supply the Beneficiary with a document setting out the conditions for support for each operation, including procedures to ensure Beneficiaries maintain a separate accounting system or an adequate accounting code for all transactions relating to an operation.

The HEIs will submit to SFI details of their research project(s) and, as the project(s) progress, request their funding requirements in instalments for the duration of the research project. SFI will examine, validate and process such requests and will authorise the SFI Finance and Operations Unit to make the necessary payments, by electronic transfer, to the relevant HEI bank account.

The HEIs will provide, as requested, detailed certification reports (B1’s) to SFI outlining eligible expenditure claimed. SFI will examine such reports and will from time to time carry out spot checks to verify actuality of expenditure claimed.

The books and accounts of the HEIs will be available on request for examination by SFI, the Managing Authority, the Certifying Authority, the Comptroller and Auditor General, the ERDF Financial Control Unit, the European Commission and the European Court of Auditors.

## **Document Retention.**

In accordance with Article 140 of the Common Provisions Regulation (EC) 1303/2013 all supporting documents regarding expenditure, verification checks, certification and audits on operations for which total eligible expenditure is less than €1,000,000.00 will be kept available for the EU Commission and Court of Auditors for a period of three years from 31 December following the submission of the accounts in which the expenditure of the operation is included. In the case of operations over €1,000,000.00 all supporting documentation shall be kept for a 2 year period from 31 December following the submission of accounts in which the **final** expenditure of the completed operation is included.

## **Monitoring and Reporting Arrangements.**

The reporting arrangements require that a progress report be submitted annually to the Monitoring Committee by the Intermediary Body in a format to be specified by the Committee. In addition, Intermediary Bodies will be required to

provide data on the IT system which will be used to transfer information to the Commission. This system is currently being developed.

SFI will monitor the performance of the measure at Regional and National level and will report to the Regional Assembly in the matter. The HEIs will confirm in relation to each project that the agreed proposals have been implemented though it is recognised that the nature of the research awards means that some of the benefits to the region and nationally will be in the longer term.

On an annual basis SFI will compile reports on research project/Programme performance at intervention level, setting out progress against agreed intervention objectives and targets and performance on the horizontal principles as laid out in the reporting template. Progress reports will cover financial management details, performance indicators and qualitative information where appropriate. Given the nature of the SFI funding mechanism to HEIs, an annual report on expenditure incurred to date at research project level under the intervention will also be provided. SFI will agree the composition and format of these reports with the Managing Authority. The IT System will be used to report on the intervention and to transfer information on to the Commission, including information on operations as appropriate.

## **Information and Publicity.**

SFI will ensure that the HEIs as Beneficiaries will comply section 2.2 of Annex XII of Commission Regulation 1303/2013 and with Articles 4 and 5 of Commission Implementing Regulation 821/2014.

The contribution of the Irish exchequer and European Structural and Investment Funds 2014-2020 will be acknowledged in all promotional material, annual reports, research laboratories, websites, letters of offer etc., by use of appropriate logo and text references. The relevant Structural Funds regulations on Information and Publicity will be complied with in this regard.