

# Digit Innovation Fund

## Frequently Asked Questions

**Q: Are Independent Research Centres eligible to apply?**

A: Yes, as long as they are approved by the ESRC – see here <https://www.ukri.org/funding/how-to-apply/eligibility/>

**Q: If there are no teaching obligations to cover, e.g. from an applicant from an independent research organisation, can the funds be used to cover part of the PI salary?**

A: Normally, we would expect funding requests to be for teaching replacement, when an applicant has teaching responsibilities. However, if there are no buy-outs for teaching or research available, then it is possible to use the funds to cover part of the PIs salary.

**Q: Are other forms of work such as digital voluntary and care work within the scope of the call?**

A: Yes, other forms of work such as digital voluntary and care work would be within the scope of the call.

**Q: Are non-academic partners supposed to contribute in-kind only?**

A: Non-academic partners are encouraged to bring whatever resources they can, whether matched or in-kind, but are not required to do so.

**Q: Can non-academic partners receive funding from the Innovation Fund?**

A: It depends. Third sector, government and businesses can be included up to 30% of the budget (at full economic costing), but a justification will be needed. It would not be expected that large businesses would be able to justify this, but charities/NGOs would probably could.

**Q: Is it possible to engage with Digit before submission to understand whether the general project idea is within the scope of the call?**

A: Yes, applicants can approach us to understand if their project ideas are generally within the scope of the call, but Digit cannot comment on your ideas, or suggest particular research design, approaches, etc. Applicants are welcome to contact Megan McMichael (Centre Manager) or the Digit Co-Directors (Jacqueline O'Reilly and Mark Stuart) for this kind of information – all contact details are on the website under People -> Digit Research Centre. It is first worth examining the [Digit research programme](#), as it is expected that all applications will align. All enquiries will be answered similarly, so as not to advantage one applicant over another. We are not able to review drafts ahead of time. Digit logs all correspondence in this regard in order to understand the questions asked and to ensure fairness.

**Q: Can the supporting statement be from my line manager? Or do I have to ask my Head of Department/Head of School/Dean?**

A: The statement must come from your Head of Department/Head of School/Dean, rather than necessarily your line manager. Some universities have restrictions on funding applications at the moment, and we need to be sure that if you applied and we offered you

the grant that your university would accept the conditions of the grant and would allow you to be able to do the research.

**Q: Is there an intention to use subsequent calls to allow new avenues for research? Or do you have a view that future calls will pick up on and develop projects that attracted funding in the earlier calls? Or is that still open?**

A: It is not intended that future calls of the Digit Innovation Fund would be limited to developing projects that attracted funding in the earlier calls, but as this is a new fund, we cannot make any definitive statements.

**Q: Do we need a letter from external partners showing their willingness to collaborate with us and the nature of the collaboration?**

A: We do not require letters of support from external partners, but where appropriate to the nature of the collaboration, it would be encouraged. For example, if a partner is integrally involved in the project, a letter would demonstrate that commitment; for a partner involved in an advisory capacity, an explanation by the PI about the relationship to that external partner and what they are providing would be sufficient.

**Q: Could you please provide an example about what you mean by innovative co-production of knowledge between academics and non-academics?**

A: There are very good examples from other ESRC-funded research. Please see the ESRC-funded [N8 Research Partnership case studies](#) and the [ESRC Impact Case Studies](#). Please also see the Chartered Association of Business Schools [\(CABS\) Impact Case Studies](#).

**Q: What are the criteria against which the applications will be assessed?**

A: Applications will be assessed against the following criteria, details of which are listed in the [guidance document](#):

**Q: Could you please explain more about Ethics and Data Management Plan as requested in the application form?**

A: Regarding Ethics, it is best to check the procedures as required by your institution through your research office, as applicants will need to adhere to them and explain the processes (with indicated times that ethics committees need applications, and their turn-around, etc.) in the application to the Innovation Fund. Further information about research ethics can also be found on the [ESRC website](#). Regarding a Data Management Plan, we are asking for you to plan and discuss the data that you will be collecting, whether quantitative or qualitative - what you will do with it, how it will be handled and stored securely, and an indication that you are willing to deposit the data with the [Digit Data Observatory](#) (which will in turn be deposited in the [UK Data Service](#)). Think carefully about sensitive data and risks of how it will be stored or transported, and how those will be mitigated. Please include any information about potential confidentiality and intention to embargo, if appropriate.

**Q: Can anyone involved with Digit apply for Innovation Funds?**

A: No, those who are receiving funding from the ESRC via the Digit grant are not eligible to be a PI or Co-I on an application but can be part of the wider project team. Advisory Board members to Digit are also ineligible to be the PI or Co-I, but again can be part of the wider team.

**Q: Can research fellows be PIs, if their contract allows?**

A: Yes, as long as the contract of employment extends longer than the proposed Innovation Fund project, then Early Career Researchers are encouraged to apply.

**Q: We are a non-academic lead working with an academic faculty for the first time – are we too early to apply?**

A: It does not matter what stage the collaboration is in, the applications will be judged on the project proposal, not the history of the relationship between the project team. Just to clarify, all applications must be led by UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Non-academic applicants, for example from a business, the third sector or a government body, can co-lead projects; however, the research funded must be academic research.

**Q: Can the Digit IF fund non-academic partners?**

A: Yes, it can fund some partners. Certain costs related to UK-based businesses, third sector, and government partners can be included in the budget up to 30% of the request (fEC). Please note, the 30% also includes non-UK academics. However, businesses, third sector and government project partners from outside the UK must bring their own funds.

**Q: Can you expand on the relative importance of academic outputs vs impact? It would be useful to know how much industry buy-in we need and effort/resources to devote to impact.**

A: This depends on the natures of the proposed project. You do not have to have industry engagement with these particular applications, e.g. they can be purely theoretical proposals that are focused on producing academic journal articles, which would not necessarily include a non-academic partner, even if you have a dissemination strategy that has impact outside of academic circles. However, if a project is more applied, then reviewers would be looking for more engagement with external stakeholders and a developed impact plan as part of that.

**Q: International collaboration – would you prioritise ODA countries or is it not important which the other country/context is as long as it's comparative?**

A: No, this fund does not require ODA countries to be identified for comparative research, so would not be prioritised over other countries.

**Q: Do all collaborators have to be Co-Is?**

A: Collaborators can be part of the project team, but do not have to be a 'Co-I'. We understand collaboration takes various forms, so it may also be appropriate simply to discuss, e.g. a non-academic partner in the Collaborators / Partners section of the application, without listing them as a project team member.

**Q: Can we have 2 PIs?**

A: No, it is not possible to have a second PI; there can only be one.

**Q: Can doctoral students be included in the project team?**

A: No, PhD students are not eligible to be included on applications to the Innovation Fund. If a student is undertaking study on a full-time basis, it is expected that all their time would be

committed to that and UKRI would not want to endorse a situation where they are over-committed. We do, however, recognise that PGRs may be costed into bids to provide casual research assistance, with the amount of time limited by local university guidelines.

**Q: Is it compulsory that a non-academic Co-I should be included in the team for this call? Or is it usually “expected” to have an external Co-I?**

A: We are encouraging collaborative work with non-academics, but it is not compulsory. It will also very largely depend on the nature of the project proposed; there are situations where it may not make sense to involve a non-academic, and we do not expect one to be ‘shoe horned’ in.

**Q: Can an institution submit more than one application?**

A: Yes, an institution can submit more than one application. However, a person can only be PI on one application.

**Q: You said the point was to create co-produced research and the Digit Innovation Fund was the first part of that. Will there be further opportunities beyond this initial fund?**

A: Yes, the Digit research centre will have further opportunities. For example, we will have [Marie Jahoda Visiting Fellowships](#) – an opportunity that we have not yet launched.

**Q: After the project, would data be stored with you as well as the ESRC Data Service?**

A: It is the intention that data will be stored in the Digit Data Observatory and deposited to the ESRC Data Service at the end of the Digit grant (i.e. 2024), as per indications in our ESRC grant.

**Q: Will international field research still be possible when the lockdown is relaxed?**

A: International field research may be possible, yes, and we’d just expect you to consider the risks and assumptions of such research and justify it within the application. It may be important to consider and find new ways to do new kinds of research, as well. Applicants should think creatively about these types of things as new opportunities because it may be there are not other viable alternatives to do something interesting. The IF does not fund conference attendance.

**Q: How will Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) be considered?**

A: We will introduce a system for this so that we can monitor who is applying and who gets grants, so that we can ensure that we are making steps to ensure we adhere to principles of EDI according to standards set by the University of Sussex and others.

**Q: Projects are meant to not exceed 12 months – how do we adjust for Covid-19 and the problems of, for example, undertaking observational research? Will there be scope to extend projects if we’re still in lockdown or constraints of social distancing?**

A: There is the general expectation that projects will not be planned for a period extending past 12 months. However, if there are specific conditions or requirements for a project to take longer, due to Covid-19 for example, we ask applicants to write these risks into the proposal and the reviewers will take this into account. There is flexibility, but in general, we are asking that project adhere to 12 months from the start date. If an applicant has

something in mind that will be significantly affected by social distancing, please plan it realistically, and make that clear in the application form.

**Q: Are there ethical concerns about using Zoom for research?**

A: Yes, this is something to think about related to the Ethics section. However, Universities are also still incorporating such methods – or may not have these answers – in their ethics procedures, so it may be about ensuring good practice, ensuring safeguards, e.g. password protected, waiting rooms, etc.

**Q: Can the research team be based only in one UK academic institution?**

A: No, the research team is not limited to one UK academic institution. Funding will only be awarded to the institution applying, but that institution can then distribute funds as appropriate.

**Q: What does the supporting statement from the Head of Department need to include?**

A: The supporting statement from Head of Department (or School or Faculty) should indicate support for both the research content and research administration, e.g. ensuring that the PI meets the necessary requirements (contract in place until the end of the proposed project), time allocation is agreed, and confirming the institutional support and contribution.

*These questions have been gathered from the webinar on 4 May 2020, as well as other enquiries. Please do get in touch if you have any other queries not answered here.*