

Digit Innovation Fund – Round 3 (2022)

Guidance for Applicants

About Digit

The Digital Futures at Work Research Centre (Digit) aims to advance our understanding of how digital technologies are reshaping work, impacting on employers, employees, job seekers and governments. It is jointly led by the [University of Sussex Business School](#) and the [Leeds University Business School](#) with partners from [Aberdeen](#), [Cambridge](#), [Manchester](#) and [Monash Universities](#). The Digit centre has been established with an investment from the [Economic and Social Research Council](#) (ESRC) equivalent to £8m for the period between 1 January 2020 and 31 December 2024.

Digit will provide theoretically informed, empirically evidenced and policy relevant analysis of the benefits, risks and challenges for companies operating in the UK and abroad. It is intended that this analysis will draw on international, interdisciplinary and innovative mixed methods approaches. Digit aims to provide a compelling empirical base that will allow policy makers to move beyond current levels of speculation, while contributing intellectually with empirical evidence to contemporary debates on the future of work.

Innovation Fund

The Innovation Fund (IF) is designed to support research, capacity building and innovative approaches as they emerge over the life of the centre. The Innovation Fund provides pump-prime support of new projects that complement the core research programme. The fund is open to the wider academic community across the UK (though partners may be based elsewhere). The Digit Innovation Fund is designed to seed-fund research projects to a value of £500,000 over the life of the Digit research centre (2020-2024). There will likely be four rounds, and the intention is to distribute funds equally across each call (i.e. approximately £125,000 per round). Projects must be costed at 100% full economic cost (fEC) and will be funded at 80% fEC, according to UKRI guidelines. Funding in Round 2 is available for projects which cost **between £10,000 to £50,000** fEC. We very strongly encourage smaller applications as we are very limited in the number of large applications that can be awarded. For reference, the average award in Rounds 1 & 2 was approximately £24,455 (at 100% fEC). We would also ask you to carefully consider the amount of PI and Co-I time included in your budget.

The Innovation Fund is designed to support:

- Research projects that advance understanding of digital futures at work, and could include **theoretical work, methodological innovation and emerging empirical developments**. Comparative research is encouraged.
- Research projects that develop and sustain **strong partnerships with external partners** in the private, third and public sectors.
- Innovative **co-production** of knowledge between academics and non-academic partners. Co-production of knowledge means engaging with research users and incorporating their needs from the beginning and throughout the research and impact activity process, with the intention of producing targeted and practical solutions for real-world problems.

Areas of Interest

- We are interested in receiving open applications that speak to and complement the existing [core research programme](#) and that fit the general guidance outlined below.

Eligibility

- Funds can only be awarded to a recognised research organisation (RO), not a person. Guidance on organisations eligible to apply for funding can be found on the [ESRC website](#). This includes a list of independent research organisations (IROs) and other organisations eligible to apply.
- Principal Investigator (PI):
 - Only one person on the application can be named as Principal Investigator (PI).
 - The PI must be employed by their UK research organisation, with a contract of employment that does not end before the proposed IF project ends.
 - Applicants must have a letter of support from their Head of Department to confirm their institutional support for the IF application.
 - We are keen to encourage a diverse range of applicants including Early Career Researchers as named PIs.
 - A PI can only submit one application to the Innovation Fund, but can be Co-I on other applications
- Organisations outside the UK are not eligible to apply to lead an IF application. They are however, eligible to be included as project partners (who would be expected to make a contribution, either financially or in-kind), Co-investigators or Consultants; please note, overseas consultants cannot be named as Co-investigators. Please see the ESRC guidance on Co-investigators from outside the UK [here](#) and the 'Funding' section of this document regarding costings for international Co-investigators.
- We would normally expect applications to include collaborations with external organisations, such as businesses, public service organisations, third sector organisations, etc. Non-academic applicants can also co-lead projects. Third sector, government and businesses can be included for 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 could.
- Digit Innovation Fund awards will be transferred from the University of Sussex to eligible ROs.
- We are not able to fund PhD studentships or Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTPs).
- Awards funded through the Digit Innovation Fund should follow UKRI's standard funding rules, [terms and conditions](#) and align to the [ESRC's research funding guide](#). Please note, however, that all correspondence should come to Digit.
- Those directly involved in Digit are not eligible to be PI or Co-I of any Innovation Fund (IF) applications but they can be included as a part of an IF applicant's Project Team. This also applies to Digit Advisory Board members.

Requirements & stipulations

- The focus of the project should have direct relevance to Digit research objectives, and be applicable to the UK.

- Applications should be social science-focused, but interdisciplinary approaches are also encouraged.
- All resulting data will be deposited to the [UK Data Service](#), as per our [Digit Data Manual](#)
- If successful, you should:
 - undertake a risk assessment as per your institution's requirements.
 - adhere to data protection and [GDPR](#) guidelines.
 - adhere to the UKRI's guidelines and procedures on research integrity, according to the UKRI's [Policy and Guidelines on the Governance of Good Research Conduct](#), as well as your institutions – and the [ESRC's](#) - ethics policies and procedures
 - adhere to the procurement policies for the lead RO and to the ESRC indications in their [Research Funding Guide](#)
- We expect projects to take no longer than one year.
- We ask that successful applicants be willing to participate in Digit future events or meetings, particularly for the purpose of sharing experience and capacity building.
- The information and application of those who are funded through the Innovation Fund may be shared with relevant organisations, e.g. ESRC.
- Any costings for non-academic organisations cannot amount to more than 30% of the budget. Non-academic organisations will receive 80% full economic costing.
- Please ensure that you engage and consult fully with any partners involved, in order that the permissions and costings are collaborative before applications are made. You may need to consult the processes of your own institution, as collaboration with some partners - e.g. NHS (or other healthcare providers) - may have specific requirements.

Funding

All projects must be costed at their full economic costing (fEC), that is 100% of costs. Projects will be awarded at 80% fEC, according to UKRI funding rules. Panel members will be given the discretion to make awards and apply conditions, which means funding awards may differ from the amount requested.

Information regarding costing Co-Is from outside the UK, a UK business, the third sector or a government body can be found in the [ESRC's Research Funding Guide](#). Please note: the combined costs for *Co-Is* from outside the UK, or from UK business, third sector and government bodies must not exceed 30% of the total fEC of the grant application. Non-academic, non-UK investigators involved as *project team members* must bring their own funds. Further information on eligible costs can be found [here](#).

Please note: we are not using the joint electronic submission system (Je-S) so the details on ESRC guidance documents do not directly apply. All funding awarded will be received via the University of Sussex, not directly from the ESRC. Financial reporting will be required according to Digit and University of Sussex requirements.

Eligible & ineligible costs

The following is a list of eligible and ineligible costs for the Digit Innovation Fund. We encourage smaller bids, and for reference, the average bids awarded in Rounds 1 & 2 was approximately

£24,445. In light of this, please consider e.g. what you may be able to contribute in-kind, particularly in terms of PI/Co-I time.

- Eligible costs include:
 - Travel & subsistence
 - Estate and indirect costs for UK HEIs
 - Research expenses & consumables, e.g. participant reimbursement for time; transcription fees; access to datasets; consumables related to surveys or other data collection, books; etc.
 - Expenses related to engagement with external stakeholders
 - Costs associated with engagement and dissemination events
 - Research assistant costs
 - Sub-contracted or consultancy costs, if necessary
 - PI / Co-I time
 - Conference attendance (any conference-related costs must be proportional to the overall budget)
- Ineligible costs include:
 - Overheads for UK businesses and government bodies
 - Funds cannot be used for purchase of items of equipment worth £10,000 (including VAT) or more and should not be for items that would normally be expected for applicants to provide (e.g. computer hardware including laptops, electronic notebooks, digital cameras, software, etc.)
 - Article publication costs (as per [ESRC research funding guide](#) regarding [open access](#))

If you are in doubt about an item, please contact Megan McMichael (m.mcmichael@sussex.ac.uk) prior to your submission.

Application guidelines and requirements

- Please consider each section on the application form as it relates to all other sections. All sections together can be considered to constitute a project plan and could contribute to your [Theory of Change](#) for achieving impact, if you use it.
- Your application and all attachments required should be integrated into one .pdf document.
- DETAILS (Section 1) – please complete this as thoroughly as possible.
 - Please provide all details indicated.
 - Please provide a 150-word maximum summary of the proposed project in clear language. Please note this may form the basis of a website description, if successful.
 - Please note that maximum duration of an award is 12 months.
 - Please state your final funding request (100% FEC) as detailed in Section 6.
- PROJECT TEAM (Section 2) – please include full details for each member of the proposed team, adding rows to the table on the application form if necessary. Please remember to consider the points above (see page 1) when considering PI, Co-I and research assistants. A 2-page CV of each team member must additionally be submitted as appendices to the single application document.
- PROJECT PROPOSAL (Section 3) – please read thoroughly and answer each question and try to adhere to the maximum number of words in each section.

- **Aims & objectives** – please clearly state your aims and objectives of the proposed Digit-related research. We expect that all bids should clearly indicate how they will contribute to the work of the Digit research centre.
- **Research design & methods** – please state your research question, your framework for determining data collection, and your intended methods for collecting and analysing data. Include your relevant previous research.
- **Project management** - please indicate how you propose to undertake the research, your plan and activities, milestones, within a realistic time frame, and indicative start and end dates for elements of the plan. Please consider and include any issues around equality, diversity and inclusion. Please also include any risks and assumptions involved.
- **Collaborators / partners** - please indicate the non-academic end users with whom you intend to engage, if not listed above, including any existing links, if applicable. Please describe the strategy for engaging. We do not require letters of support from external partners, but where appropriate to the nature of the collaboration, it would be encouraged.
- **Deliverables & impact** - please describe what you will deliver (your outputs), according to the milestones indicated above, and anything that may follow, e.g. follow-on funding, etc. Please indicate how this project can lead to significant changes (impact) in policy, practice, etc. that contribute to Digit objectives, clearly discussing what you would like to change, for whom, and the pathways for achieving it. Please refer to the ESRC's Impact Toolkit <https://esrc.ukri.org/research/impact-toolkit/>
- ETHICS (Section 4) – be as thorough as possible as to how you will handle Ethics within your project and your institution, including deadlines.
- DATA MANAGEMENT PLAN (Section 5) – outline your plan for managing the resulting data, how they will be made secure, and your ability and willingness to deposit share with the [UK Data Archive](#) which will in turn be signposted via the Digit Data Observatory. As we encourage you to deposit your data to the UK Data Archive, please plan for this in advance when e.g. creating participant information sheets.
- BUDGET & JUSTIFICATION OF RESOURCES (Section 6) – be as clear and as specific as possible in your description of costs and please justify them in the space given, indicating which part of the project they relate to and their necessity.
- STATEMENT OF SUPPORT (Section 7) – please provide a letter of support from the Head of Department/School/Faculty who can authorise the research time and fEC contribution of their institution for the applicant. This letter must be included with the application. The supporting statement 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. Please also attach additional letters of support from project partners into the single .pdf submission.

Assessment of the Innovation Fund applications

Applications will be assessed according to the evaluation criteria of the project proposal as such:

1. Aims, objectives, project rationale and contribution to Digit

2. Research design & methods
3. Deliverables & Impact
4. Appropriate expertise of the project team (PI and partners) and project management
5. Value for money

Applications will enter a 2-stage evaluation process:

Review – Reviewers will score each item above on a scale of 1-5. Each reviewer will also be asked to comment on each application in terms of the major strengths, weaknesses, and whether the weaknesses are sufficient to prevent the proposal from being funded.

Panel – The evaluation panel consists of an independent chair, independent academic reviewers external to the Digit centre, a member of the Digit Advisory Board, the Co-Directors of Digit (Prof Jacqueline O’Reilly and Prof Mark Stuart), and observers including a representative from the ESRC. The panel will consider the ranking of the reviewers and the fit with the Digit research programme. Any panel member who has a conflict of interest in relation to one or more applicants or applications will be required to notify the Digit Centre Manager immediately.

The application process aims to ensure maximum equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI). This will be done by requiring panel members to:

- 1) refresh their EDI training through resources (e.g. [here](#) & [here](#));
- 2) adhere to the assessment criteria; and
- 3) challenge each other on any signs of unconscious bias in the assessment procedure.

Peer Reviewers will be required to follow [University of Sussex Equality & Diversity policy](#) by ensuring that applicants are assessed solely against the guidelines, and not according to “age, disability, gender reassignment or trans identity, marriage or civil partnership, pregnancy or maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation, trade union membership or non- membership, socio-economic background, or any other inappropriate distinction”.

Applicants should ensure applications are written clearly, as they will not necessarily be evaluated by experts in a particular field.

Monitoring and Reporting

Successful applicants will be required to submit a final narrative report at the end of the project and must be accompanied by a financial report. Follow-up reports may be requested after the funding has ended to ensure we can capture outputs to feedback to ESRC.

Digit will report the relevant findings from all successful awards to the ESRC.

All awards will be announced on the Digit website.

Key dates

- Call opened: Wednesday, 20 April 2022
- Webinar: Friday, 6 May 2022 – see *Digit website for details*
- Application closing date: Wednesday, 8 June 2022 by 5pm UK time
- Decision to applicants anticipated: by Fri, 29 July 2022

- Project start date: projects should start no later than 1 October 2022
- Project end dates: projects should aim to end by 30 September 2023 or before and submit a final report

For further information

Please contact Megan McMichael (m.mcmichael@sussex.ac.uk), Centre Manager, and cc: digit@sussex.ac.uk for any information or questions.

Before getting in contact, please first examine the [Digit research programme](#), as it is expected that all applications will align and complement the existing research programme, as well as the **Digit Innovation Fund - FAQs**.

All enquiries will be answered similarly, so as not to advantage one applicant over another. All correspondence with the Digit centre will be logged to understand the questions asked and to ensure fairness.

To apply

Please email all applications and attachments in **one .pdf document** to digit@sussex.ac.uk by the closing date: **Wednesday, 8 June 2022 at 5pm (GMT)**.