

Digit Innovation Fund Frequently Asked Questions

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Eligibility of applicant

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: Can anyone involved with Digit apply for Innovation Funds?

A: Those who are receiving funding from the ESRC via the Digit grant (e.g. Co-Investigators and Research Fellows) 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. Associate Fellows are welcome to apply, as PI, Co-I or project team member.

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: What if a PI's contract comes to an end before the end of the project?

A: The PI should have a contract of employment that goes until the end of the Innovation Fund project, or guarantee that they will be given an extension to lead the project, via letter of support from their Research Organisation.

Q: Can we have 2 PIs?

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

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: Can a former applicant (whether successful or unsuccessful) apply again?

A: Yes, we invite applications from former applicants. For those who were previously successful, we would expect the research aims of a subsequent application to be based on new findings or directions, and not an extension of the initial research.

Q: Would a successful Innovation Fund recipient still be eligible to apply for the UKRI New Investigator Grants?

A: As the funding is administered from the University of Sussex (and not the UKRI), you should still be eligible to apply for a UKRI New Investigator Grant afterwards, should you be successful.

Q: Can I apply as a single applicant (without a team)?

A: Yes, but we would also encourage you to think about a network, and who can support or – if you are an Early Career Researcher – offer a type of mentoring as part of the project team.

Project Team

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 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: Should projects have collaborators who are just in the UK, or is it appropriate to allocate some budget for international collaboration?

A: Information regarding costing Co-Is from outside the UK (or 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 academic 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.

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: Is there a preference for methodologies, disciplines or approaches of the PI or project team?

A: We are welcome to accept applications from interdisciplinary backgrounds and open to different methods. We just ask that projects are relevant to work and employment, in the digital world.

Partners

Q: Are non-academic partners expected to be involved from the beginning?

A: If you are intending to work with partners for your project, we would recommend getting in touch as soon as possible, and ideally include them in the application. Co-production is not mandatory, though. It would be good to think about the impact strategy of your work, early.

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: 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: 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 nature 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: Will it be OK if I need a non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) or memorandum of understanding (MOU) with my collaborators?

A: Yes, that is fine, and please demonstrate in your application that you anticipate this. If this is not addressed early, there could be problems you will encounter with sharing data, and NDAs/MOUs can take valuable time to set up.

Q: Should we estimate in-kind support / time from partners?

A: Yes, if you can – there is space on the application form for this. Your Research Office may be able to help with estimates if the partners cannot provide this directly.

Accepted topics & activities

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: Will international field research still be possible, given current conditions?

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: 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: Projects are meant to not exceed 12 months – how do we adjust for Covid-19 and the problems of, for example, undertaking observational research?

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 all projects meant to be 12 months, or can they be slightly shorter if it makes sense?

A: If you can get it all done in less than 12 months that is fine - we indicate 12 months as we are working on a 12-month cycle and would expect a report at the end of that period.

Please make sure you give yourself enough time to get it all done and produce good, quality research.

Q: Can the research project be related to any of the Centre's four themes, or are you looking for a particular area for this call?

A: We are looking for research that connects to and complements the research of Digit. Have you identified any gaps that could complement Digit research? Make sure to look at our four [Research Themes](#), and what has already been funded by the [Innovation Fund](#), as well.

Q: Can funding be requested for incentives for e.g. focus group participants?

A: Yes, but it will also depend on the sample group / participants, and the need for incentives amongst certain groups.

Q: Is it reasonable to say that we will deliver a paper as a result of the project?

A: Yes, but be reasonable and think about the timeframe.

Q: Is it sensible to apply for one big project, or several smaller projects if they contain multiple parts / case studies?

A: We encourage people to be ambitious, but within realistic parameters. We generally discourage £50k proposals, and encourage smaller ones, but as we do not fund very many each round (around 5 funder per round), putting in multiple applications for a similar project could be high risk, if not all of them are funded.

Application requirements

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: 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.

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: 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 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: Is an element of teaching buy-out an acceptable cost?

A: Eligible costs include the time that PIs and Co-Is would need to do their research for the project. However, please note that the cost of direct teaching replacement cannot be requested.

Q: Would it be OK for a project to not have PI time costed and only have Research Assistant (RA) time costed?

A: Yes. In general, RA costs are allowable, and can also be an opportunity for capacity building for early career researchers to learn how to manage RAs, which Digit is keen to support.

Q: If I have received data ethics approval already for a project, would additional ethics approval be needed?

A: No, if that approval already covers what you need to do, Digit does not require any further demonstration of ethical approval. Digit is not involved in approving ethics, this will reside with your own institution.

Q: In the "Research design & methods" section of the application, it asks us to "Include your relevant previous research". How much detail is expected here?

A: The detail doesn't have to be extensive, but should give the panellists confidence that you have a strong background in the methodological approach, e.g. through previous experience. Please be concise and relevant. Also, your experience will be presented in your 2-page CV.

Q: Can I request the maximum, £50,000?

A: We encourage smaller applications; the average awarded budget in Round 1 (2020) was around £23,250 (100% fEC). An application at £50,000 fEC would have to be incredibly novel and exhibit exceptional value for money.

Q: Do we have a view on open science practices, such as pre-registered hypotheses?

A: We do not require this, but are aware that this is more advanced in some disciplines. If it's appropriate to your field of study and you see this as valuable, that is fine.

Assessment

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 on the website.

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: Is a reference list considered part of the word count?

A: No, the reference list will not be considered as part of the word count, and can be added as a separate appendix at the end of the main application.

Q: Can you put live links in the application, or would you prefer applicants to avoid?

A: We wouldn't expect to see too many, and please avoid using links if it only to stay within the word limit, but it's fine if it is to give context to the proposed project.

Q: Who is on the assessment panel?

A: The panel will be chaired by Dave Perfect, formerly of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, and consists of external academics, the Digit Co-Directors, and a Digit Advisory Board member, as well as an observer from our funder, the ESRC.

Post-project

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 deposited to the ESRC Data Service as close to the end of the project as possible, and never longer than the end of the whole Digit grant (Dec 2024), as per indications in our ESRC grant.

Q: Can you advise if we use a qualitative method what you would expect to be deposited post-project?

A: The UK Data Service has guidance on how to deposit all forms of data (quantitative or qualitative): <https://www.ukdataservice.ac.uk/deposit-data/how-to.aspx>. You may find the 'depositor stories' helpful, as they give examples of the process and challenges that previous depositors have experienced: <https://www.ukdataservice.ac.uk/deposit-data/stories.aspx>. The UK Data Service advise to consult their website, ideally before collecting any data, to best understand how to prepare it.

Q: Is it absolutely necessary to share data if it is highly sensitive? If there are reasons for a project not to do it, will it disadvantage the application?

A: We understand that there are sometimes highly sensitive data that could cause difficulties for the PI if made public, even if anonymised. Please indicate this in your

application and consult the UK Data Service website; we can work with you on this, and it will not disadvantage your application.

Q: Who would own the datasets to be generated by the project - the industry partner, my University or Digit?

A: You may need address issues through agreements with industry partners, but generally, all data funded the ESRC should be deposited with the UK Data Service post-project.

Q: Does Digit have networking events where Early Career Researchers (ECRs) can know others from different disciplines, exchange ideas, etc.?

A: Successful applicants will have many opportunities to get involved in Digit activities that support early career researchers, such as Papers in Progress meetings, where you can present early papers with feedback from others in the Digit community.

Q: Can I apply again, if I was successful before?

A: This is seed-corn funding, so we would not expect to fund the exact same project again, extend funding, or fund pieces of the same research at different times. However, applicants are welcome to apply if there are new research questions based on new findings or directions from previously funded research.

Contact / engagement with Digit ahead of application

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.

These questions have been gathered from previous queries. Please do get in touch if you have any other queries not answered here.