

Explanatory memorandum: Principles governing the preparation of the new funding scheme for Academy Research Fellowships

1. Introduction

The Board of the Academy of Finland announced on 4 February 2022 the launch of preparations for a new funding scheme for Academy Research Fellowships. Designed to support early-career researchers in their efforts to make significant progress towards more demanding research positions, the new scheme will combine and replace the Academy's existing funding opportunities for Postdoctoral Researchers and Academy Research Fellows. Preparations are ongoing with a view to introducing the new funding scheme in connection with the autumn 2022 call.

The broad lines of the new funding scheme are set out in a separate document that details the peer review criteria applied to research funding decisions. That document will be submitted for the Board's approval in April 2022. However, in view of providing support and guidance for the preparatory process and for applicants, it is appropriate at this early stage to establish certain principles of the new funding scheme. To make sure that potential applicants are left with enough time to prepare high-quality applications, early attention must be given to the timetable for the introduction of the new funding scheme; the aims of the new scheme; the target group for the scheme; and the main principles for the use of funding. Therefore a decision-in-principle covering these key aspects will now be submitted to the Board so as to provide guidance for the continued preparation of the new funding scheme and to facilitate communication and support to applicants.

2. Stakeholder consultations

On 7 February 2022, the Academy launched stakeholder consultations on the objectives and principal components of the new funding scheme. Stakeholders' views were canvassed through a written consultation that was open from 7 to 22 February 2022 and through oral consultations on 14, 15 and 17 February 2022. The written consultation attracted 617 responses, while a total of 346 persons took part in the oral consultations. In addition, the reform was discussed with representatives of key unions and associations and with the research and financial management of research organisations. Feedback was also obtained via email, telephone and social media channels.

A few points stood out in the diverse feedback. The positives mentioned most often were the plans to rescind the mobility requirement and to allow for greater flexibility in funding uses. The chief sources of concern, then, were the plans to limit eligibility to applicants who have completed their first doctorate at least two years but no more than seven years ago. The main focus of criticism was the proposed ceiling of seven years, compared to the current limit of nine years for applications to research posts as Academy Research Fellow. In addition, concern was



expressed about the role of Academy funding in supporting the research careers of recent doctoral graduates.

The consultation process also solicited the respondents' opinions on how applications for new Academy Research Fellowships should describe the applicants' career development and how that development should be evaluated. There were a large number of responses and they are still under review, but they will be used in support of the preparation process during spring 2022.

The Academy Board discussed the stakeholder feedback at its meeting on 24 February 2022. The feedback was taken onboard for the further preparation of the new funding scheme for Academy Research Fellowships.

3. Principles

3.1. Introduction of new Academy Research Fellowship funding scheme

Intended to support early-career researchers on a fast career track, the new Academy Research Fellowship funding scheme will be introduced in connection with the Academy's autumn 2022 call. At the same time, current funding opportunities for research posts as Postdoctoral Researcher and Academy Research Fellow will no longer be opened for application. Also, no allocations will be granted for early-career Academy Project funding. Funding decisions made before 31 December 2022 for research posts as Postdoctoral Researcher and Academy Research Fellow or for early-career Academy Project funding will remain in force under the current terms and conditions. Furthermore, funding made available for research costs associated with current research posts as Academy Research Fellow will continue and decisions on funding extensions will be made under existing terms and conditions.

The aim of the reform is to revise and refine the Academy's science policy objective in the funding of early-career researchers, to streamline the Academy's funding portfolio, to simplify the application process, to allow for greater flexibility in funding uses during the funding period and to ease the administrative burden on individual researchers, research organisations and the Academy of Finland.

3.2. Aim of new Academy Research Fellowship funding scheme

New Academy Research Fellows are promising early-career research talents who can be expected to benefit from Academy funding in such a way that they can make significant career progress towards more demanding research positions and achieve an established position in the national and international research community. Academy Research Fellows produce high-quality, high-impact research that stimulates the renewal of science.

One of the Academy's science policy objectives is to support early-career researchers, who have a key role to play in driving the renewal of science. The idea and aim is that the international peer reviews organised by the Academy identify the researchers who are best placed to renew Finnish science and research and in this way to produce added value for the Finnish RDI system.

The new funding scheme for Academy Research Fellowships differs in its objective from Academy Projects in that the aim is to support not only research excellence but also the individual researcher's career development. The funding provided should have long-term



impact so that it significantly aids the new Academy Research Fellow's pursuit of qualifications and professional advancement both during and after the funding period.

3.3. Target group for new Academy Research Fellowship funding scheme

Applications for new Academy Research Fellowships will be accepted from researchers who have completed their first doctorate at least two but no more than seven years ago. In the autumn 2022 call, however, applications may be submitted by researchers who at the application deadline have completed their first doctorate at least two but no more than nine years ago. Fellowships will not be granted to persons holding a tenured professorship or comparable research position.

Eligibility is limited to two to seven years since the first doctorate because at this career stage, it is thought that applicants will be in the position to demonstrate the standard of postdoctoral qualifications required for an Academy Research Fellowship and to make significant progress towards to more demanding research positions during the funding period. Applicants will have conducted postdoctoral research and made conscious choices to advance their research career, but as a rule will not yet have reached the career stage required for eligibility to a position as principal investigator of an Academy Project. In view of the science policy objective set for the new scheme, it is important that eligibility is defined in such a way that the Academy can in the peer review process identify applicants who will be able to make significant career progress during the funding period.

One major long-standing concern for both researchers and other stakeholders has been the low success rate of applications. Ever tougher competition for funding causes a host of problems both in terms of an increased workload for all parties concerned and in terms of the allocation of funding. The idea behind targeting the Academy Research Fellowship call at a rather closely defined group of applicants is to maximise the prospects of achieving the science policy and impact objectives set for the funding scheme as well as to achieve a reasonable application success rate.

There was extensive stakeholder feedback that the revision of eligibility rules for the new Academy Research Fellowship may be particularly problematic for applicants who at the time of the autumn 2022 call have taken their first doctorate more than seven but less than nine years ago. Many of them have made career choices with a view to applying for a research post as Academy Research Fellow in the autumn 2022 call, but under the new rules they would no longer be eligible.

Along with this feedback, it is necessary to acknowledge that the Academy of Finland has previously emphasised the need for a long-term approach to the application process. With this in mind it has recommended that applications for a research post as Academy Research Fellow, for example, are not submitted until the applicant has reached a career stage where they feel they have the necessary maturity.

For these reasons it is necessary to consider introducing a transition period such that in the autumn 2022 call, applications would be accepted from researchers who at the application deadline have completed their first doctorate at least two but no more than nine years ago. As of the autumn 2023 call, applications will only be accepted from researchers who have completed their first doctorate at least two but no more than seven years ago.



Given the aim of the new funding scheme to support career progress, it would be neither justified nor appropriate to grant new Academy Research Fellowships to persons holding a tenured professorship or comparable research position. However, this limitation is not intended to hamper the prospects of newly appointed Academy Research Fellows to secure a permanent position in a university's tenure track system, for instance.

Eligibility for a new Academy Research Fellowship will no longer require prior mobility between research environments. Based on the feedback received, the decision to drop the mobility requirement will generally meet with a positive response in the research community. It is expected that this change will make it easier for researchers to reconcile their work and family life; ease the administrative burden caused by the interpretation of ambiguous situations; and increase equity among applicants. Although changes in the work environment in terms of physical mobility are still often important to the researcher's career development, there are today other ways of achieving fruitful cooperation.

Rescinding the mobility requirement is part of a broader effort to target Academy funding through eligibility rules. The Academy is keen to support the researcher's growth to independence and the development of diverse skills and competencies, and applicants are expected to show such growth and development by the time they submit their application. However, this does not necessarily have to involve physical mobility; career progress will be evaluated from a broader perspective.

3.4. Use of funding granted for new Academy Research Fellowships

Funding for new Academy Research Fellowships will be granted for a period of four years. Funds can be made available for payment of the researcher's salary and other costs associated with implementation of the research plan in line with the terms and conditions of funding to be confirmed at a later date. Funding will be granted following the full cost model.

It is thought that a four-year funding period will provide sufficient opportunity for the researcher to make significant career progress. The funding period must be long enough so that researchers working in fields relying on experimental studies, for example, will be able to conduct significant research. On the other hand, funding periods longer than four years would to a great extent tie down Academy funding resources and therefore significantly lower the applicants' success rate.

Successful applicants for new Academy Research Fellowships will receive a single funding decision. New Academy Research Fellows may receive funding to cover costs associated with the implementation of their research plan in accordance with the funding terms and conditions valid at the time of submission, which will be decided upon at a later date. The general principle is that the funding may be used towards the payment of the new Academy Research Fellow's salary, the research team's salary and other research costs.

A single funding decision and flexible funding uses are important steps towards a smoother application and research process, as well as towards easing the administrative burden. At this career stage it is important that if necessary, the funding awarded can also be used for the payment of the applicant's salary.



In keeping with Ministry of Finance guidelines, the Academy of Finland awards virtually all its funding based on the full cost model for co-funded projects. In order to achieve the flexibility goals set for the funding of new Academy Research Fellowships, it is necessary to adopt a practice whereby funding decisions follow one single cost model. Consultations with the research and financial management of research organisations ahead of the funding scheme reform indicated that the full cost model was the funding method of choice for research organisations. For this reason, funding for new Academy Research Fellowships will be based on the full cost model.

4. Next steps in the preparation of the new Academy Research Fellowship funding scheme

Preparation of the new funding scheme for Academy Research Fellowships will continue with the submission of the revised criteria for research funding decisions to the Academy Board in April 2022. The document describes the principles outlined here as well as other features of the new funding scheme. The Academy's Administration Office will announce its decisions on the call for applications, peer review documents and the terms and conditions of funding in May-June 2022, as per the regular timetable for the autumn call.