

# Funding principles of the Strategic Research Council

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## 1. Introduction

The Strategic Research Council (SRC) is an independent body established within the Research Council of Finland that provides funding to solution-oriented, phenomenon-driven and programme-based research. Each year, the SRC prepares a proposal on key strategic research themes and priorities to be approved by the Finnish Government. The Government decides the final themes, which the SRC then formulates into research programmes. The projects to be funded must be of a high scientific standard and have societal relevance and impact. An important element of strategic research is the interaction between researchers and knowledge users throughout the projects.

The SRC applies the Research Council of Finland's criteria for research funding decisions, as appropriate. This document defines the funding principles decided separately by the SRC that deviate from the Research Council of Finland's criteria. The SRC's activities are also guided by the Act and Decree on the Research Council of Finland and by the Research Council of Finland's Rules of Procedure. The practical implementation of research funding is described in more detail in the Research Council of Finland's funding terms and conditions and in the latest call texts.

## 2. Applying for funding

### 2.1. Programme calls

SRC funding may be granted to consortia that work under a joint research and interaction plan and a funding plan. In order to achieve broad and multidisciplinary composition, at least three different organisations must participate in the consortium. In addition, the research to be conducted in the consortium must belong to at least three research fields listed in the Research Council of Finland's research field classification.

The consortium projects funded under SRC programmes receive funding for 3–6 years. The research plan will be drawn up for the entire project period, but in programmes exceeding four years, funding will, as a rule, be applied for in two parts. In this case, a mid-term review and a follow-up call will be organised in the middle of the programme period. Consortia will report on their activities and submit an updated research and funding plan for the second funding period.

There are also specific financial aspects to SRC calls. Firstly, the SRC funding contribution comes to 100 per cent, following the full cost model. Secondly, the consortium's funding plan may also include the full-time salaries of the PI, the subproject PIs and the WP leaders.

The SRC encourages applicants to plan international cooperation to promote understanding and societal solutions based on the best scientific knowledge in Finland. Under new SRC programmes, funding will no longer be granted for projects to be carried at foreign sites of research. However, Finnish sites can apply for funding for international cooperation and mobility in SRC projects in accordance with the funding conditions of the Research Council of Finland.

As a rule, SRC funding is not granted to support economic activity. Economic activity is defined as all activity where goods or services are offered on an open market. However, funding may be granted to an economic operator if the activity to be funded is not an economic activity and the economic activity of the operator can be separated from the activity to be financed in accounting or if the funding can be granted in accordance with the de minimis regulation (Commission Regulation 1407/2013).

## 2.2. Call for programme directors

A part-time programme director employed by their own background organisation, such as a university or research institute, is selected for each SRC programme. The programme directors are responsible for programme-level development of interaction and cross-programme cooperation, and for the promotion of the societal impact of strategic research. In addition, their duties include facilitating the specifying of the programme objectives and monitoring the objectives in cooperation with the funded projects and the SRC.

The funding for programme directors is project-based funding. The funding is applied for to the programme director's background organisation. It consists of the salary costs for the director's part-time work and the operating costs for programme management. The programme director is also required to make a significant contribution to the joint programme and impact activities of strategic research. Although the programme director funding may also be used, where necessary, for the salary costs of persons assisting the directors, the responsibility for the programme director's activities rests with the person who has received the funding, and most of the hours invoiced must be allocated to the work they have done. The salary costs shall correspond to 40–60% of the working hours, depending on the number of programmes being managed. In addition, a maximum of 1,000 euros per month may be granted for operating expenses for each managed programme.

### **3. How applications are reviewed**

The review of applications for SRC funding largely follows the Research Council of Finland's review practices and utilises the Research Council of Finland's information systems.

#### **3.1. Programme calls**

Applications for funding from SRC research programmes will be reviewed based on both scientific quality and societal relevance and impact. The research and interaction plan appended to the application shall describe both the scientific activities and the societal relevance of the project. The SRC will use the review panels' assessments of the scientific quality and societal significance of the applications as criteria for selecting the projects to be funded. Attention will also be paid to possible interviews with applicants and the achievement of any science policy objectives set for the programme call. In addition, the selection takes into account aspects related to the formation of the programme package.

#### **3.2. Call for programme directors**

The programme director applications are reviewed by a preparatory group consisting of external experts and members of the SRC. The group will review each application based on three factors: how well the applicant's societal networks and scientific expertise fit the programme, the quality of the action plan and the societal impact. The SRC's decisions on programme directors are based on an overall picture of the interviews and applications and on the realisation of the science policy objectives set out in the call for applications. In addition, the selection takes into account aspects related to the formation of the programme package.

### **4. Terms and use of funding**

A consortium must have a principal investigator (PI) and an interaction coordinator. Consortium PIs must have a doctoral degree and hold the title of docent or have research experience at the docent level.

The SRC requires that consortium PIs commit themselves with a sufficient level of input to heading the consortium. A consortium PI may be assigned as PI in only one SRC-funded consortium at a time. Similarly, subproject PIs or WP leaders cannot have equivalent assignments in other consortia under the same programme. Directors of the Research Council of Finland's Centres of Excellence cannot act as PIs for SRC consortia.

A programme director may be programme director in no more than two SRC-funded programmes at a time. A programme director may not act as consortium PI, subproject PI or work package leader in the programme they manage. Directors of the Research Council of Finland's Centres of Excellence cannot be programme directors for SRC programmes.

An application will not be processed if the applicant has participated in the planning of the concerned programme or followed the planning to an extent likely to give them a comparative advantage over other applicants. Applications by members of the Research Council of Finland's Board and scientific councils and members of the Strategic Research Council will not be processed during their terms. An application will also not be processed if a member of the above-mentioned body is a work package leader in an SRC consortium.

SRC funding is programme-based funding. The funding period of SRC funding may be extended for justified reasons, which are mentioned in the Research Council of Finland's funding terms. If an extension is applied for to cover the salary and other expenses of a person working on a subproject for the above reasons, the extension application shall justify the extension by describing how the person will contribute to the project's research and interaction objectives during the extension. However, the extension will not affect the duration of the programme and the consortium concerned nor the timing of the final reporting and evaluation. During the extension, the subproject may invoice only the salary and other expenses of the person concerned.

Since the pursuit of societal impact is a key element in SRC programmes, the funded consortia and programme directors are required to participate actively both in the interaction activities of their own programme and in the cross-programme activities for societal impact.

Easy access to the research data, scientific publications and other outputs produced in the projects, even after the end of the programme period, is important for the impact of strategic research. For this reason, it is recommended that the site of research commits to maintaining the project website 3–5 years after the end of the funding period.

## **5. Impact monitoring and evaluation**

The SRC monitors the funded projects and assesses their impact. The funded projects report on their activities and their impact both during and after the funding period. Programme directors, too, are obliged to report on their activities. Monitoring and evaluation contribute to the monitoring task defined in the Finnish Act on Discretionary Government Transfers.

The purpose of the monitoring during the funding period is: 1) to encourage projects and programme directors to regularly review their activities in relation to the joint objectives of the programme and the project's or programme director's own impact objectives; 2) to gather information for the cross-programme activities for social impact and the communication of strategic research; and 3) to gather information on the activities of projects and programme directors for the impact evaluation.

The impact assessment can cover both ongoing and completed programmes and projects. The aim of the final evaluation is to assess the current or prospective scientific and societal impact of SRC funding, and to develop the strategic research funding instrument. The evaluation focuses on the processes, outputs and outcomes of the research and interaction activities funded, as well as their observed or anticipated effects. A particular focus in the review will be on the results of multidisciplinary work and the ability to promote scientific renewal. Special characteristics of each programme and project, as well as different societal roles of science are all considered in the impact review.

The monitoring and evaluation follow the principles of open and responsible science. For example, the materials to be used and the results of the evaluation will be published as openly as possible. The methods are transparent and quantitative analyses repeatable. Additionally, the appropriateness of the follow-up and evaluation system is inspected regularly.