



SFC Alliances for Research Challenges (ARCs) Call for Expressions of Interest



Scottish Funding Council
Comhairle Maoineachaidh na h-Alba

SFC ANNOUNCEMENT

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Deadline: 6 June 2022

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Summary: To fulfil our Review's recommendations for research collaboration and launch our new initiative – SFC Alliances for Research Challenges – by issuing a call for expressions of interest.

FAO: University Principals, University Vice-Principals Research, R&I Subscribers

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SFC Alliances for Research Challenges (ARCs) - Call for Expressions of Interest

Introduction

1. The Scottish Funding Council is pleased to invite expressions of interest for new Alliances for Research Challenges (ARCs).
2. ARCs will connect Scotland's research excellence to Scotland's national challenges. They will build on our distinctive collaborative ethos and our world-class universities – drawing in others including Innovation Centres, research institutes, industry partners and policy-makers – to prime the Scottish landscape to respond to challenge-focused research funding opportunities.
3. Alliances for Research Challenges are intended to:
 - Forge multi-institutional, cross-sectoral and multidisciplinary connections around key societal challenges that have a clear line of sight to Scottish Government priorities.
 - Increase external research funding investment in the Scottish research system by targeting and influencing external research funding opportunities.
 - Raise the profile of the contributions of research to societal challenges.
4. SFC's funding will enable universities to create broad groups that coordinate and support bids for research with the aim being to benefit Scottish society in a way that's consistent with Scottish Government strategic priorities.
5. In this first call, up to four ARCs will be funded by SFC for four years (spanning five academic years AY 22/23 - AY 26/27).
6. We are inviting expressions of interest which outline **potential challenge areas** where ARCs could be commissioned, and coalitions who could potentially form them, in response to this call by 6 June 2022.
7. Up to four successful coalitions will then be invited to submit full proposals for Alliances for Research Challenges funding.
8. In this document we set out the aims, objectives and assessment process for this call for expressions of interest, as well as a draft of the call for full proposals.

Background

SFC's Review

9. SFC's [Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability](#) made recommendations for how SFC should support research collaboration in the future. It outlined an intention to create next-generation networks that build on our sustained investment in the Research Pooling Initiative, taking a focus on interdisciplinary challenge-oriented research collaboration and leveraging additional funding. It also stated that, given the excellence of our research base and the collective challenges we face, we need to mobilise funding and action, across disciplines, to coalesce around particularly knotty societal problems.
10. In [response to our Review](#), the Scottish Government indicated their support and stated that it is clear that a missions-based approach could benefit the evolution of SFC investments and that they will expect agencies to align around key societal challenges, such as the urgency needed to tackle the climate emergency and to reduce health and wellbeing inequalities.
11. We have worked closely with senior university leaders and others to develop the vision for SFC's future support for research collaboration, based on these recommendations.

SFC Alliances for Research Challenges

12. The critical opportunities and challenges facing us as a society demand focus from the research community. From the Covid-19 recovery, to the climate emergency, and the necessary just and fair societal transformation that will be required to ensure everyone can prosper, it is more important than ever before that research plays its full role in contributing to our society and economy. Alliances for Research Challenges aim to support the Scottish research landscape to connect and coordinate in response.
13. SFC investment in ARCs also reflects the changing research funding landscape in both UK and international contexts, and, in particular, the shift towards challenge-led research and mission-oriented approaches. This includes within UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) funding programmes (noting the five strategic themes outlined in [UKRI's five-year Strategy](#)), the UK Innovation Strategy, the soon-to-be-launched Advanced Research and Invention Agency (ARIA) and Horizon Europe's Missions (pending UK association or domestic replacement). The Scottish Government's [National Strategy for Economic Transformation](#) and forthcoming Innovation Strategy also point to focused approaches. These changes present an opportunity for Scottish university research.
14. ARCs are intended to harness opportunities by forging novel multidisciplinary connections between diverse nodes of excellence within the research

community, and linking university research with the wider ecosystem.

15. SFC's funding will be catalytic in creating ARCs by providing organisational resource to bring together groupings that are broader than those that already exist. They will be centred on defined societal challenges where research can play a pivotal role, with a direct line of sight to Scottish Government priorities, and will support the development of bids for research funding.
16. SFC will commission ARCs via a two-stage process, separating the identification of challenges from the full development of coalitions. In this call, stage one, we are inviting expressions of interest that outline challenge areas where Alliances for Research Challenges could be commissioned and the kernels of potential coalitions that could deliver them.
17. Following this, stage two later this year will see up to four coalitions invited to each develop a full proposal.

Relationship with Research Pools

18. Research Pools are an established and valued part of universities' research success in Scotland, recognised and funded by external funders including the Scottish Government, UKRI, industry, the EU and the Enterprise Agencies. SFC established the Pools with Scotland's universities over 15 years ago.
19. SFC is proud of the achievements of Pools and has confidence in the continuing and growing contributions they will make to Scotland's future success after the transition point in January 2023 when Pools will become fully university 'owned'.
20. We very much hope that, where valued and funded by universities and others, Pools will continue as an important component of Scotland's research landscape, maintaining current activities and developing new functions as appropriate. As part of the research community's response to this ARCs opportunity, we anticipate that some Pools are likely to be involved in the delivery and/or leadership of ARCs. With the encouragement of the university sector, SFC intends to continue to regard Pools as important structural contributors to Scotland's research, and research training, excellence. We are considering, as also heralded by our Review, how best to work directly with Pools on research training and this will be the subject of a later communication.

Call for expressions of interest

21. In this first stage, SFC is inviting prospective coalitions of Scottish universities and others to **propose challenge areas** for Alliances for Research Challenges.
22. Major Scottish Government policy imperatives should be considered as a **high-level guide** to the big picture priorities under which we are seeking ideas for individual tractable research challenge areas. We anticipate that suggestions for

challenge areas will link to priorities outlined within the Scottish Government's [National Strategy for Economic Transformation](#), the [National Performance Framework](#), the [Climate Change Plan](#) and other key documents.

23. We seek a broad range of ideas, from all parts of the academic community, which display the combination of being clearly relevant to Scottish Government needs, tractable as multi-disciplinary research problems and likely to attract funding. (Full challenge criteria are outlined in the section below.) To illustrate an appropriate level of granularity, we might imagine a 'reducing child poverty' challenge, or a 'quantum technologies for Scotland's future' challenge, or an 'addressing the mental health impact of the Covid-19 pandemic' challenge.
24. An assessment panel will support SFC to determine up to four challenge areas where ARCs will be developed. The panel will consider, in addition to the likely merits of individual expressions of interest, how best to consider them as a set - in order to draw on as much research excellence and offer as much potential for impact on a number of timescales as possible.
25. Prospective coalitions should be led by a university or universities, recognising that delegation of leadership to a Research Pool or other multi-university structure might be appropriate. As ARCs will be a research-led commission, we will preclude leadership by an Innovation Centre, a Fraunhofer or other similar entities and partners. However, we will encourage involvement of these entities in prospective coalitions. We anticipate that a variety of new and existing collaborations could come together to deliver ARCs, including industry partners and policy-makers where relevant.
26. The deadline for responses is noon on 6 June 2022. Proposals will be considered by an assessment panel in June 2022. The selected challenge areas and the panel's advice on prospective coalitions will be announced and successful consortia will be invited to submit full proposals by the end of July 2022 (see Annex B for the **draft** call for proposals for SFC Alliances for Research Challenges).

Challenge criteria

27. Expressions of interest should outline how the challenge area proposed meets the criteria below.
28. To be considered, prospective Challenges must -
 - Align with Scottish Government priority(ies);
 - Involve areas of evidenced Scottish sector research strength;
 - Require multidisciplinary responses;
 - Link to defined or prospective funding opportunity(ies), for example from

UKRI, UK, EU (pending association), Scottish Government or other research funders; and

- Be of appropriate scale – balancing breadth and specificity.

29. In addition to the above, we expect expressions of interest to **briefly indicate the capacity for coalition/partnership formation** to deliver an ARC in the challenge area proposed. For example, the relationships that the Pools have made with each other and/or other consortia could feature as well as the involvement of entities such as Research Institutes (e.g. the six Scottish Environment, Food and Agriculture Research Institutes, [SEFARI](#)), Innovation Centres, industry partners, policy-makers, colleges, charities or others. Institutions not based in Scotland may also participate where they add key complementary strengths, with the proviso that SFC's funding does not support activity where the benefits are exclusively realised outside of Scotland. We advise that formal coalition / network building **does not** begin until the announcement of the results of this stage.

30. We will ask that responses focus on a single challenge area and are brief (no more than four pages in length). Expressions of interest must follow the proposal structure outlined in Annex A.

Funding

31. No funding will be awarded as a result of this expression of interest stage. However, successful applicants will be invited to submit full proposals for SFC Alliances for Research Challenges and funding of up to £600K over four years.

Equality and Diversity

32. SFC considers equality and diversity in all of its activity. SFC asks institutions to be mindful of the Equality Act (2010), including the statutory requirement for Equality and Human Rights Impact Assessments (EHRIs) of new and revised strategies and policies. EHRIA are not required in response to this call for expressions of interest but will be sought in response to the full call for proposals.

Submission

33. The deadline for proposals is noon on 6 June 2022. Proposals should be submitted to Dr Cat Ball, cball@sfc.ac.uk.

Assessment

34. Expressions of interest will be considered by an assessment panel that includes independent representatives from SFC's partner and other organisations. The assessment panel is likely to include representatives from Scottish Government and external stakeholders representing both UK and international perspectives. Equality, diversity and inclusion will be considered in the development of the panel.
35. The assessment panel will support SFC to determine up to four challenge areas and, as appropriate, judge, negotiate and develop prospective coalitions of Scottish universities where ARCs will be developed. We will ask the panel to consider where submissions could be merged, additional collaborations formed, or improved in other ways, as necessary/appropriate.
36. At the end of the assessment process, we envisage that a single potential grouping – a single 'bidder' - will be selected in each challenge area which is chosen to proceed. This grouping will then be invited to submit a full proposal (see Annex B for further details). SFC envisages being involved in a degree of co-design in what is then to be a non-competitive process, seeking to help consortia make a case with the best chance of being judged as fundable (either by the same assessment panel or a different panel).
37. Stage 1 assessment criteria will focus on:
- The involvement of a broad and appropriate range of disciplines and areas of Scottish research strength.
 - The urgency, relevance and alignment of challenges with Scottish Government priority policy areas.
 - The potential to attract external research funding.
 - The added benefit brought as a result of SFC's investment.
38. The final set of challenges will be chosen to embrace the contribution of a range of areas and disciplines, including the arts, humanities and social sciences.

Indicative Timetable

Action	Date
Call for expressions of interest launched	29 March 2022
Deadline for expressions of interest	6 June 2022
Assessment panel	June 2022
Applicant notification* and successful applicants invited to submit full proposals	By end of July 2022
Deadline for full proposals	December 2022
Announcement of successful Alliances for Research Challenges	February 2023

*We will provide feedback to unsuccessful applicants at a later date. The level of feedback will be dependent on the number of proposals received.

Data Protection

39. Any materials produced, reporting required, promotional information, etc. must be compliant with data protection and General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) requirements. Institutions must ensure any participants are aware of how their information will be processed in accordance with GDPR. For more information about how SFC uses personal data please see our Privacy Notice.
40. SFC reserves the right to share content, reports and other information with the Scottish Government and other relevant stakeholders to promote and evidence the way in which funding has been used.

Further information

41. SFC welcomes early discussions with interested parties. For further information and informal enquiries please contact: Dr Cat Ball, email: cball@sfc.ac.uk, tel: 0131 313 6660.

Annex A – Outline structure for expressions of interest

42. Responses must include the following sections in the order listed. Expressions of interest should use this structure to meet all proposal criteria. Proposals which do not provide this information will be ineligible.

43. We will require a cover sheet which includes:

- Relevant contact details.
- Interested partner universities/organisations.
- Disciplines that would be included.

44. Submissions should be maximum four pages (excluding cover sheet) and cover:

- A brief description of the proposed challenge area, including:
 - How it aligns with Scottish Government priorities (through reference to key strategy and/or policy documents or otherwise).
 - The nature of the multidisciplinary response required and how areas of evidenced Scottish sector research excellence and quality would be required to be involved.
 - Justification of the balance the challenge strikes between breadth and specificity.
- Suggested future or current defined funding opportunity(ies) which an ARC focused on this challenge would be well-placed to target.
 - For example, funding from UKRI, UK Government, Horizon Europe (pending UK association or a domestic equivalent), Scottish Government or other research funders.
- A brief description of the prospective or potential coalition of universities and others involved which could deliver an ARC in this area. This should indicate who would lead.
- The added benefit that would be brought by SFC funding.

Annex B – SFC Alliances for Research Challenges – Draft invitation to submit full proposals

45. *This second stage process will be non-competitive and only successful applicants from the expressions of interest stage will be invited to submit full proposals. This text is included as **an indicator of the likely requirements**, process and approach in order to inform the expressions of interest process, and the **detail may be subject to change**.*
46. *We intend stage two to be an interactive process involving negotiation to ensure that ARCs aim at the right targets and programme of work.*
47. *We advise prospective Alliance partners **not** to make formal and detailed plans before being invited to do so as the EOI stage is expected to result in a degree of re-configuration, negotiation and co-design. The full proposal structure below is given in draft to help understanding at this stage.*

Invitation to submit full proposals

48. Collaborative university-led research groupings will be invited to submit proposals for funding of up to £600,000 each over four years to run one of four SFC Alliances for Research Challenges (ARCs). Each ARC will focus on a different challenge area connected to Scottish Government priorities, as determined by the outcome of the expressions of interest stage. SFC will work with applicants and their partners to ensure that our criteria are being met.
49. ARCs will be connectors across the Scottish research landscape, driving coordination to build collaboration and support the development of bids for research funding. Though SFC will not be prescriptive of their activities, we would expect that some of the things that ARCs do would include:
- Convening workshops and events.
 - Horizon scanning.
 - Development of leadership groups.
 - Early career researcher support (linking and building on Research Pool activity where relevant).
 - Creation of credible large-scale multi-disciplinary research funding bids.
50. For example, ARC funding could be used largely for salaries and to buy out staff time to deliver the activities above. It could also be used to support the costs of workshops or sandpits, or potentially the costs of a consultant to support work on

a large-scale funding bid.

51. SFC will **not** explicitly require that institutions match our funding for ARC. We will require ARCs to show that they will have sufficient resource available to support their proposed activities. An ambitious and appropriate target of funding leverage into Scotland will be one part of our assessment criteria.
52. ARCs will be required to contribute to positive research culture. This includes an explicit aim to support early career researchers (ECRs) and a proactive ambition to further diversity, equity and inclusion. We see this as a helpful corollary to the work that Research Pools are doing on a (in some cases) more mono-disciplinary basis. ARC activity in this space will be explicitly linked to SFC's research culture ambition as outlined in our Review.
53. Outcomes, impacts and progress indicators will be co-developed with SFC to create a suitable evaluation framework and approach for each ARC. We are cognisant of the challenge of quantifying impact for this type of activity and expect this to be a key area of focus in the development of the ARC.

Proposal criteria

54. Proposals will be invited from successful applicants to the expressions of interest stage. Proposals:
- Will be based on the specified challenge area identified as a result of the expressions of interest stage, allowing for amendments suggested by the EoI panel.
 - Should consolidate and provide further information as relevant on what was provided at the expressions of interest stage including:
 - Fit with Scottish Government priorities.
 - Alignment with defined area(s) of current or future investment from UKRI, Horizon Europe or other sources of research funding.
 - The nature of the multidisciplinary response required and how areas of evidenced Scottish sector research strength are involved.
 - Should be led by the university or universities identified following the expressions of interest stage, on behalf of a partnership of universities and others.
 - Should draw on other parts of the system as appropriate and relevant, including Scottish Innovation Centres, colleges, research institutes, non-Scottish HEIs and other infrastructure and bodies as relevant, including industry partners and policy-makers (noting this will vary depending on the

challenge). Note that Partnerships should not be hosted or led by these entities.

- Should indicate how their proposed ARC's activities will be resourced, going beyond the SFC support where necessary.
- Should give a credible account of their ambition to leverage investment into the Scottish research landscape in the challenge area.
- Should outline an anticipated programme of planned activities, events etc. that will be central to the ARC.
- Should include an account of the effort the proposed ARC will put into involving the ECR community and supporting equality, diversity and inclusion.
- Should outline suitable outcomes, impacts and progress indicators which will be co-developed with SFC to create a suitable evaluation framework and approach for each ARC.

55. Proposals should be submitted by each consortium's nominated host university and must be signed off by participating universities. Host universities (or delegated multi-university structures) will be required to administer SFC funding on behalf of the ARC and report back on the use of this funding.

Funding

56. Each successful ARC will be offered SFC funding up to a maximum of £600K over four years, at up to £150K per annum.

57. SFC will fund up to four ARCs, making our total investment up to £2.4m over four years (spanning five AYS 22/23 - 26/27). Depending on progress, performance against developed success measures and SFC's future funding settlements, we will consider funding additional Alliances for Research Challenges in the future.

58. SFC funding will be allocated to and managed by the consortium's nominated host university. Other institutions involved in the project at the outset must also be listed in the proposal.

Equality and diversity

59. SFC considers equality and diversity in all its priorities. SFC asks institutions to be mindful of the Equality Act (2010), including the statutory requirement for Equality and Human Rights Impact Assessments (EHRIs) of new and revised

strategies and policies. **Proposals must include an EHRIA.** Institutions can complete their own EHRIA form or use SFC's form which is available upon request. Further information and guidance are available from SFC's website.

Submission

60. Proposals must be able to demonstrate senior level support from the nominated host university. Applications will only be eligible if signed by the Principal or delegated signatory.

Assessment

61. Eligible proposals will be taken forward for consideration by the same assessment panel who considered the expressions of interest.

62. SFC will develop assessment criteria for full proposals in due course.

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