

National Research Data Infrastructure (NFDI)

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

This version corresponds to the German version last updated on 11 September 2020.

The FAQs will be updated regularly.

Updates to previous English-language versions are marked in **green**.

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Eligibility

Does the consortium have to provide evidence of its non-profit/public-benefit status in the proposal (e.g. through submission of a legal opinion or statement from the tax authorities)?

- No, this is not required, particularly since the specific legal nature of a consortium may only emerge during the course of the project. However, the consortium is responsible for ensuring that the requirements that apply to a non-profit/public-benefit entity are sufficiently met.

Can I submit a binding letter of intent in 2021 even though I didn't submit a non-binding letter of intent in 2020?

- Yes. Prospective applicants are not required to submit a non-binding letter of intent in 2020 to be eligible for proposal submission in 2021. Note, however, that a binding letter of intent must be submitted in 2021.

How can commercial organisations be integrated into a consortium?

- Where necessary, commercial organisations may be integrated into a consortium through a tender process for third-party services. An organisation can only be involved as a participant if an assessment of tax-related aspects has concluded that such an involvement would not jeopardise the non-profit/public-benefit nature of the consortium.

Can Max Planck and Fraunhofer institutes participate in consortia as (co-) applicant institutions?

- In general, Max Planck and Fraunhofer institutes have no legal capacity. If such institutes would like to take on the role of a (co-) applicant institution in an NFDI proposal, the Max Planck Society and the Fraunhofer-Gesellschaft must be listed along with their specific participating institutes. It is understood that the relevant institute director has the authority to take part in the consortium and enter into obligations relating to its proposed applicant role on behalf of the association in accordance with the relevant by-laws/statutes of the association (Article 28 of the MPG by-laws, Article 21 of the statutes of the FhG).

Can international institutions or facilities based in Germany serve as (co-) applicant institutions in the proposal?

- International institutions and facilities that comply with non-profit/public-benefit requirements and are based in Germany are generally eligible to submit proposals. Each case will be examined individually.

Proposal Submission

Who has to sign the various proposal documents?

- The proposal must be submitted via the DFG's elan portal. In addition to submitting the proposal electronically, the applicant institution must print and sign the compliance form generated after the proposal is uploaded in elan and send it to the DFG Head Office. The heads of all co-applicant institutions and all co-spokespersons must each sign the NFDI General Compliance Form (www.dfg.de/formulare/nfdi130). This form should not be sent to the DFG. The compliance forms may be kept on file decentralised at the **relevant** institutions. In cases of alleged research misconduct, the DFG will contact the

spokesperson's institution. This institution is responsible for providing to the DFG the relevant compliance forms, which are either kept centralised at the applicant institution or decentralised at the **co-applicant** institutions.

All participants named in the proposal must draft and sign an informal letter of commitment confirming their participation. The letters of commitment must be submitted in the proposal's appendix.

Can I resubmit a proposal that was declined in the first round?

- Yes, this is possible. Note, however, that it will be processed as a new proposal.

Data

To what extent can data from the private sector be used in the development of the NFDI?

- Where it is relevant for a community to incorporate data from the private sector into its research, such data can be incorporated. However, strict compliance with the relevant legal requirements (e.g. tax or civil law) must be ensured.

Funding

Is it necessary to apply for the programme allowance for indirect project costs?

- No. Only direct project costs must be itemised and justified in the proposal. The programme allowance of 22 percent of the approved project funds is allocated automatically.

What is considered an “appropriate contribution”?

- The contribution depends on the specific composition of the institutions participating in a consortium and the existing infrastructures and services which a consortium can use during the funding period. As part of the evaluation process, reviewers will assess whether the specified contribution is appropriate in relation to the requested funds. The basic tasks of the applicant institutions do not count as part of their contribution.

The nature and scope of the contribution must be such as to demonstrate a substantial interest in the consortium on the part of the applicant institution. This, too, is assessed during the review.

Under what circumstances can instrumentation costs be covered by the grant?

- Instrumentation can only be funded in exceptional circumstances. Requested instrumentation costs can only be approved if the proposal contains a detailed and convincing explanation of how the requested item is essential to the development of NFDI services and infrastructure; this is assessed during the review. The proposal should also justify why this instrumentation cannot be provided as part of the institution's core support.

If the proposed consortium will be awarding contracts to third parties: How many quotes should be submitted with the proposal?

- In general, at least two quotes should be submitted for comparison.

Can the costs of activities such as upscaling, simplifying, merging, migrating or increasing the user-friendliness of existing services and infrastructures be covered by project funds?

- Yes. To receive funding for these and similar cost items, applicants must explain in detail what benefits will be generated for the consortium's community of interest as a result of the planned changes.

Can participants apply for funding themselves?

- No. Funding required for the integration of participants can be requested by the applicant institution or a co-applicant institution.

How can funds be forwarded to participants?

- In general, funds can be forwarded to participants in accordance with the applicable legal (tax) provisions, provided that these are not earmarked funds or funds for temporary positions for principal investigators. Requirements usually include the following:
 - Participating institutions must be universities or non-profit (research) institutions.
 - The intent to forward the funds within the research cooperation was indicated in the proposal and assessed during the review process, thereby constituting part of the grant or this was subsequently approved by the DFG.
 - The forwarding of funds is based on a legal agreement ensuring that the regulations of the relevant funding contract as well as funding guidelines apply to the participant, i.e. the participant receiving funding must observe and comply with all conditions and requirements to which the original grant recipient is obligated vis-à-vis the DFG (e.g. obligation to provide evidence, the DFG's right to audit).

What considerations have to be made with regard to requesting funding for future project tasks and extensions?

- The category "direct project costs" can be used to request funding for future project tasks. Funds must be requested for the year of their expected use and justified in the proposal. The anticipated purpose of funding must be described in as much detail as possible.

Such funds may also be used to integrate additional co-applicant institutions and participants. Upon successful review by the DFG, these co-applicant institutions and participants may be incorporated into existing consortia through a cost-neutral grant extension.

Can consortia request funding to address cross-cutting topics that are to be implemented as part of the overall structure of the NFDI?

- Yes. Consortia can apply for funding to address cross-disciplinary topics as part of their task areas. Such requests should be coordinated with the Directorate and other consortia.

Are grant funds tied to a particular time period?

- Yes. Funds are tied to a fiscal year. Only in justified individual cases can a certain portion of the funds be transferred to the next fiscal year. Informal requests may be assessed by a member of the review panel.

Can consortia request funding to coordinate NFDI-wide activities? Or will the Directorate have central funds available to cover such coordination tasks?

- Funding for collaboration and/or exchange within the NFDI should be requested by the individual consortia.

How should increases in staff costs be taken into account? The proposal template refers to DFG staff funding rates for 2020. How binding are these rates?

- When preparing your budget, remember to account for increases in staff costs over the proposed duration of the grant. The DFG staff funding rates provided for 2020 serve as a basis for calculating staff costs during the proposal phase. Anticipated increases in staff costs may therefore be considered in the overall budget request. Note, however, that once consortia grants are awarded, staff cost adjustments can no longer be made, even if DFG staff funding rates increase in future years.

Can unspent project funds be granted for use in a subsequent year?

- Grants are generally tied to the fiscal year stated in the award letter. In exceptional cases, you may request that unused project funds for a given fiscal year be granted again for use in a subsequent year. Written requests must be submitted to the DFG by 30 September of the relevant fiscal (calendar) year. In your request, briefly describe why this transfer is necessary, explaining in particular what project tasks will be undertaken in the future using these funds.

Please note that due to the limited availability of funds and the resulting lack of financial flexibility, we anticipate that not all requests to transfer funds to a subsequent year can be approved.

Additional information can be found in the NFDI funding guidelines (www.dfg.de/formulare/nfdi300/nfdi300_de.pdf).

Organisation

How should a consortium be internally organised?

- Each consortium is free to choose its own form of organisation. What is important is that the chosen form of organisation optimally underpins the consortium's objectives and is supported by all co-applicant institutions. The internal structure of the consortium should also take into account integration into the structural elements of the NFDI, such as the Consortia Assembly.

Can the consortia charge fees for the use of services?

- In general, fees may be charged. The Agreement between the Federal Government and the *Länder* concerning the Establishment and Funding of a National Research Data Infrastructure (NFDI) of 26 November 2018 lists as one of the funding criteria an “operating model which meets the needs of users and suppliers (including reasonable user fees where appropriate)”. The charging of moderate fees can be part of an operating model that enables a consortium to continue performing its tasks in the longer term. The business model must comply with the legal requirements and guidelines within which the consortium carries out its activities.

Where will cross-cutting topics be addressed?

- Cross-disciplinary topics are central to the work of the NFDI and should be addressed in the subject-oriented or method-oriented consortia. Agreement between the consortia on cross-disciplinary topics is necessary and may for instance be part of the coordination process within the NFDI structure – e.g. within the framework of the Consortia Assembly. Consortia proposals focusing exclusively on cross-disciplinary topics will not be considered in 2020. The NFDI Directorate is responsible for coordinating cross-disciplinary topics.

Roles

If more than one task area is being managed by the applicant institution: Do the task areas have to be managed by the spokesperson alone or can the applicant institution appoint co-spokespersons in this situation?

- In this situation, the applicant institution can appoint co-spokespersons.

Is only one co-spokesperson allowed at each co-applicant institution, or can more than one co-spokesperson be appointed per co-applicant institution if the institution is responsible for more than one task area?

- If the co-applicant institution is responsible for more than one task area, it can appoint more than one co-spokesperson.

What requirements must be met by the applicant institution?

- The applicant institution must provide the organisational structure necessary to manage the funds and have significant experience in managing public third-party funds.

Are the coordination duties of the consortium spokesperson organisational and/or financial in nature?

- The consortium's coordination tasks are both organisational and financial. The spokesperson coordinates the proposal and, together with the applicant institution to which he or she belongs, is accountable to the DFG for the proper management and use of funds.

What are the duties of the co-spokespersons of a consortium?

- Co-spokespersons are responsible for task areas within the consortium and therefore have content-related and coordination tasks. They are responsible for forwarding the results of their task area to the spokesperson. They work closely with the spokesperson.

What is the difference between the role of a co-applicant institution and that of a participant?

- Co-applicant institutions are responsible for managing one or more task areas and request funding for this purpose. Should a grant be awarded, co-applicant institutions receive their funds through the applicant institution.

The role of the participant is intended for those who have ongoing responsibility for the implementation of the project, but to a lesser extent than a co-applicant institution. One-

time or occasional support for the consortium is not sufficient to constitute the role of a participant. Contributions by participants must be described in the proposal.

Can additional institutions and/or facilities and other participants be added after the grant has been awarded?

- Grants are awarded to consortia on the basis of the structures of the (co-) applicant institutions and participants described in the proposal. In exceptional cases, it is possible to add additional institutions/facilities and participants following the award. In this case, please send a written request to the DFG and include a short description explaining why this is necessary.

Review and Evaluation Process

Do you anticipate scheduling changes with regard to the review process due to the coronavirus pandemic?

- **Reviews will be conducted in a virtual format.** The main elements of the review as implemented in the first round should be also applied in the second round.