



International

Human Frontier  
Science Program

Organization

# HFSP Research Grant Applications

From the Reviewer side:

What makes an application good?

13 January 2026

Tone Tønjum

Department of Microbiology

UiO, OUS, Norway



UiO • University of Oslo





International

**Human Frontier  
Science Program**

Organization

## A reminder about HFSP's philosophy for Research Grants

- **HFSPO promotes and supports basic research in the life sciences**
  - New-thinking, cutting edge research extending the frontiers
  - Focused on the elucidation of the sophisticated and complex mechanisms of living organisms (no applied projects)
  - Initiated by new international interdisciplinary teams of 2-4 (rarely 5) members
- **HFSPO attaches the highest importance to**
  - Scientific merit: frontier, cutting edge, new thinking / methodology, high risk-high reward
  - Internationality (especially intercontinentality) and
  - Interdisciplinarity/contributions from different approaches to the research question



International

Human Frontier  
Science Program

Organization

## **The HFSP research grant application**

### **Originality and level of innovation**

**The proposal is highly interdisciplinary in a rare combination that is squarely aligned with HFSP's priority**

Idea: Highly original and novel concept and hypothesis  
and/or original and innovative extension beyond state-of-the art

**Important:**

**To calibrate your hypothesis, questions and goals to the HFSP priorities and criteria**



International

**Human Frontier  
Science Program**

Organization

**The original and novel hypothesis  
and innovative extension of state-of-the art  
must be clearly explained**

**Efficient communication of  
a complex scientific message**



International

Human Frontier  
Science Program

Organization

## The Research Grant Team

### Team composition and qualifications

- **Scientific merits, competence and capacity:** The PIs can cover the tasks to be performed, no competence or capacity is missing
- **Necessity of collaboration:** All competencies are required and must be there
- **Complementarity:** The team members complement each other in synergy
- **Interdisciplinary:** Highly interdisciplinary in a rare combination that is squarely aligned with HFSP's emphasis on cross-disciplinary teams
- Team composition should be **international**
- **Team composition and qualification**
  - **to enable feasibility and reduce risk**





International

**Human Frontier  
Science Program**

Organization

## **Team: Is the required expertise in place?**

- Even if key goals of this program (international collaboration, a new collaboration and interdisciplinary team of experts) scores highly, is the required expertise in place?
- The proposal should not merely be a straightforward extension of each PI's current research direction; rather, it should build extensively on their prior expertise to pursue a genuinely novel integrative and interdisciplinary approach.
- The team should be well positioned to do the research, with the relevant background to tackle such an ambitious program. The project should be distinct from their ongoing research programs.

The research plan and complementary and synergistic contributions of each PI must be described



International

**Human Frontier  
Science Program**

Organization

**Groundbreaking high-risk high-gain:**

**Risks should be inherent in the novel concept / experimental plan**

**Risk should be linked to the groundbreaking nature of the proposal**

**Risks should not be due to technological challenges in the  
experimental design, at the expense of the science**



International

**Human Frontier  
Science Program**

Organization

## **Important points to keep in mind**

- Keep in mind: “frontier”, high risk – high reward, not necessary with preliminary data in common, new project for a new team, where each have relevant preliminary data for the new idea
- The proposal should not be merely a straightforward continuation or extension of each PI’s current research direction; rather, it should build extensively on their prior expertise to pursue a genuinely new, integrative and interdisciplinary approach
- HFSP embraces risky projects, but the proposal should inform on any risks, challenges and flaws – sound critical risk mitigation has great value
- Follow the HFSP criteria – is important!





International

**Human Frontier  
Science Program**

Organization

## **What are the most common weaknesses in applications that don't get funded?**

Not enough novelty

The state-of-the-art is not up date

Team is not adequate or described well enough

Risk mitigation is not adequate

Risk is related to technicalities or lack of competence/capacity. Risk should be linked to the groundbreaking nature of the proposal.

A group of talented PI's will be able to generate interesting results, but these will not necessarily be considered as 'major ground-breaking discoveries'. Even though some aspects of the experimental design is challenging, it is not necessarily considered as a 'high risk' proposal in the way it is meant by HFSP.



International  
**Human Frontier  
Science Program**  
Organization

**Good luck with your novel idea and your proposal!**

