Norwegian Centres of Excellence – SFF-V – Phase 1

Application type: Research Centre
Application deadline: 18 November 2020, 13:00 CET
Relevant thematic areas for this call: Ground-breaking research
Target groups: Research organisations

Amount of funding presumed available for this call for proposals: NOK 1 750 000 000. Approximately 11 new centres will be awarded SFF status.

Project duration: minimum 120 months
Upcoming call for proposals: 20. October 2021
Contact for the call: SFF | sff@forskningsradet.no

Important dates

25 May 2020: Information meeting: Follow the meeting via our website.

07 Oct 2020: Date call is made active

14 Oct 2020: Information meeting: Follow the meeting via our website

18 Nov 2020: Application submission deadline

31 May 2021:

The final decision on which grant applications will be invited to advance to Phase 2 of the application process is planned to be announced in May 2021.

20 Oct 2021: The application submission deadline for Phase 2

30 Jun 2022: The new SFF centres will be announced after the summer of 2022.

01 Sep 2022: Earliest permitted project start
Purpose

The SFF scheme gives Norway’s best researchers the opportunity to organise their research activities in centres that seek to achieve ambitious scientific objectives through collaboration and with long-term basic funding.

The research conducted at the centres must be innovative and have major potential to generate ground-breaking results that advance the international research frontier.

The centres must work with ambitious ideas and complex problems that require coordinated, long-term research activities within or across disciplines to achieve their objectives.

The call is open to grant applications within all disciplines and research areas.

Call for proposals

SHORTCUTS

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About the call for proposals

This call comprises the first phase of a two-phase application process to select the fifth generation of the Centres of Excellence (SFF-V). Phase 1 is open to all applicants. Phase 2 will be reserved for prequalified applicants selected from the Phase 1 assessment process.
The respective centres recommended for funding upon completion of Phase 2 will be invited to a contract meeting with the Research Council. In connection with their planning activities, applicants should acquaint themselves with the Research Council contract and the attachment setting out the specific requirements and guidelines for SFF-V centres. See here for a preliminary version in Norwegian.

If the centre is awarded SFF funding, the contract is to be signed by the centre’s host institution and the Research Council. A breach of the terms and conditions of the contract during a centre’s period of operation will have consequences for continued funding.

The Norwegian-language call for proposals is the legally binding version. In the application review process, only the English-language assessment criteria will be used, and it is the English-language assessment criteria that are legally binding.

Who is eligible to apply?

Only approved Norwegian research organisations may serve as the Project Owner. See the list of approved research organisations.

In the context of the SFF scheme, the Project Owner is also referred to as the “host institution”.

Who can participate in the project?

**Requirements relating to the Project Owner**

The host institution is to be listed as the Project Owner in the grant application form.

The top administrator of the host institution (rector for universities/university colleges, top director for other research organisations) must have approved the submission of the application to the Research Council. Within the application submission deadline, the host institution must submit a list of the grant applications approved for submission to the Research Council. Applications not specified on this list will be rejected. The list must be sent to: sff@forskningsradet.no.

Host institutions submitting more than four grant applications are expected to have a woman centre director in at least 40 per cent of the proposed centres. To facilitate follow-up of this stipulation, host institutions planning to submit more than four grant applications must additionally submit a list of the planned applications and centre directors well in advance of the application submission deadline, and at the latest by 1 October 2020. A centre is considered to have a woman director if a woman is designated as centre director from the planned start-up, or there are plans to switch to a specified woman director for at least half the centre’s period of operation.

**Requirements relating to the project manager**

- The individual designated as project manager must also be the centre director.
- To qualify as project manager, individuals must hold an approved doctorate or have obtained qualifications at associate professorship level before the date of the application submission deadline. In the context of this call, current or previous employment in the Norwegian research institute sector in
a position as forsker 1 (research professor), forsker 2 (senior researcher) or seniorforsker (senior researcher) is considered equivalent qualification.

- The project manager must be employed by the Project Owner/host institution (Norwegian research organisation).
- An individual may serve as centre director in only one grant application.
- A director of an SFF centre that will still be receiving Research Council funding in 2024 (SFF-IV) is not eligible to apply as project manager.
- Such persons may participate in other grant applications but may not serve as centre director.
- An SFF centre may have only one centre director at a time. A centre may nevertheless have two individuals who alternate in filling the role of centre director. This may be done by changing directors once during the centre's period of operation, or by alternating back and forth multiple times.
- If the centre director is not employed by the host institution at the time of application deadline, submit a signed letter from from the centre director (see the template “SFF-V Confirmation Centre director” at the end of this call) where she/he confirms to accept a minimum 80 per cent position at the host institution and as a centre director and will be physically present at the host institution for a major part of her/his time.

Requirements relating to collaborating partners
An SFF centre is not required to have partners.

Only approved Norwegian research organisations and corresponding research organisations in other countries are eligible to be partners and to receive funding.

The centre is intended to further develop a leading research environment in Norway, so financial support to international research organisations is therefore to be limited. If the proposed centre will incorporate financial support to international institutions, the project description must explain how this funding will benefit the development of the Norwegian research environment.

If the proposed centre is awarded funding, a collaboration agreement between the host institution and each collaborating partner must be signed at the institution level before the SFF contract between the Research Council and the host institution can be signed.

As a general rule, the centre is to consist of research groups co-located at the centre’s premises at the host institution.

Principal investigators employed by a collaborating partner must be present in person at the host institution on a regular basis.

Other types of organisations, such as companies and other undertakings, are not eligible to be partners in an SFF centre and receive support, but they may serve as suppliers of R&D services to the project. In such cases, the intellectual property rights related to the result of the supplier’s work activities will become the property of the institution procuring the services.

For companies defined as “undertakings” in the state aid rules, it is particularly important to note that the Research Council does not award state aid under the SFF scheme. See the Research Council webpage on Conditions for awarding state aid for more information.

Requirements relating to group leaders/principal investigators
CVs must be submitted for minimum two and maximum six group leaders/principal investigators. If the centre is planning for two centre directors, maximum five CVs can be submitted, in total maximum seven CVs. The following requirements apply to the group leaders for whom CVs are submitted:

- Group leaders must be employed by the Project Owner/host institution or one of the collaborating partners.
- If a group leader is not employed in Norway at the time of application deadline, a confirmation from her/him must be attached. She/he must confirm that she/he will dedicate minimum 20% of the working time to the centre and be physically present at the host institution for minimum four weeks every year.
- If a principal investigator is employed by a non-Norwegian collaborating partner, a standard, signed letter (see the template “SFF-V Confirmation group leader” at the end of this call) must be submitted in which the principal investigator confirms that he/she will be employed in at least 20 per cent of a full-time position at the centre during its period of operation and will be present at the host institution for a minimum of four weeks total each year.

Individuals may participate as a principal investigator in multiple grant applications.

What can you seek funding for?

The Research Council’s funding scale for each centre is NOK 80–180 million over 10 years.

As a general rule, an SFF centre will have several different funding sources: the funding from the Research Council, own financing from the host institution, own financing and funding from any collaborating partners, competition-based research commissions, and other private/international funding.

The Research Council makes a distinction between the centre’s:

- basic funding – to be entered in the grant application form;
- supplementary funding – to be entered in a mandatory attachment to the grant application form (see the template SFF-V 10-year budget).

**Basic funding**

Basic funding typically consists of the SFF grant from the Research Council, own financing from the host institution and any collaborating partners, and other funding that has already been secured.

The Research Council does not require a contribution of own financing for basic funding. However, an SFF centre has scientific objectives and a level of complexity that will normally require a substantially higher level of funding than the Research Council’s grant. It is therefore recommended that the research organisation/host institution responsible for the SFF centre and/or the centre’s collaborating partners contribute to the basic funding amount. In addition, already secured contributions from other parties, such as foundations and private and public organisations, may be included in the basic funding.

The basic funding must finance activities that support the centre’s objectives. This may include payroll and indirect costs (including costs related to visiting researchers), costs for use of research infrastructure, travel and meeting expenses and other operating expenses.
Please see the webpage on What to enter in the project budget for details and important information.

Please note: The grant application form does not have enough room for all ten years. Therefore, only the first 60 months, 2022–2027, are to be entered.

The basic funding amounts for the entire 10-year period are to be entered in the attachment "SFF-V 10-year budget.xlsx" along with the amounts of additional funding. A maximum of 60 per cent of the RCN’s SFF contribution for the ten-year period can be planned for the period prior to the mid-term evaluation, the first 72 months.

**Supplementary funding**
Supplementary funding consists of all other anticipated income, including income from new competition-based research contracts.

The Research Council expects the host institution and any collaborating partners to obtain and include new competition-based research projects that support the centre’s research objectives. Existing projects with funding that runs into the centre’s period of operation may also be included in the additional funding. The optimal amount of additional funding will vary from centre to centre, and the applicant will be asked to state a realistic financial target for this funding in the attachment to the grant application form. The extent to which the centre achieves the stated target for additional funding will be monitored through annual progress reports, a mid-term evaluation and the centre’s final report.

**Conditions for funding**
The Research Council will not award support that constitutes state aid under this call. This means that the Research Council funding must only go to the non-economic activity of the research organisations. The Research Council requires a clear separation of accounts for the organisation’s economic and non-economic activities.

Each centre is planned financed for 10 years, but the mid-term evaluation may conclude that funding will be terminated earlier.

The Research Council’s requirements relating to allocation and disbursement of support for the first year and any pledges for subsequent years are set out in the General Terms and Conditions for R&D Projects.

Please note that our General Terms and Conditions will be updated as of 1 January 2021 (same link), and that these are the terms and conditions that will apply for new SFF-projects.

**Scientific articles and research data**
The Project Owner (research organisation) is responsible for selecting the archiving solution(s) to use for storing research data generated during the project. Applicants need only specify this information if their proposed centre is recommended for funding after Phase 2 of the application process. The Project Owner (research organisation) is to specify the planned solution in the revised grant proposal after Phase 2.

**Medical and health-related studies involving human participants**
In the case of medical and health-related studies involving human participants,
the Research Council stipulates special requirements and guidelines for the prospective registration and public disclosure of results.

Relevant thematic areas for this call

Ground-breaking research

Practical information

Requirements for this application type

Grant applications may be created starting six weeks before the application deadline and are to be submitted via “My RCN Web”. You may revise and resubmit your grant application form multiple times up to the application submission deadline. We recommend that you submit your application as soon as you have filled in the application form and included all mandatory attachments. After the deadline, it is the most recently submitted version of the grant application that will be processed.

Applications that do not satisfy the following requirements will be rejected:

- The grant application, including all attachments, must be submitted in English.
- All mandatory attachments must be included.
- Requirements relating to the project manager must be satisfied.
- Requirements relating to the Project Owner (research organisation) must be satisfied.

Attachments

The designated templates found at the end of this call must be used. Links contained in the submitted attachments will not be included in the application review process.

Mandatory attachments

- A project description, 1 front page + 5 pages project description (optionally including some references) + 1 page reserved for references. This is to be uploaded as a single attachment of maximum seven pages.
- CV(s) for the project manager/centre director(s) (maximum two pages) + 10-year track record (maximum two pages). CV + track record are to be uploaded as a single attachment of maximum four pages.
- CV (maximum two pages) + 10-year track record (maximum two pages) or CV (maximum two pages) + early achievements track record (maximum two pages) for minimum two to maximum six group leaders. If there are two centre directors, maximum five CVs for group leaders can be uploaded. Upload an attachment of maximum four pages for each principal investigator.
- A funding plan that specifies the centre’s total funding, both basic funding
and additional funding, for ten years. Use the Excel template “SFF-V 10-year budget” and upload under “Attachments/Other items” in the application form.

- If the centre director is not employed by the host institution at the time of application deadline, submit a signed confirmation from the centre director. Use the template “Confirmation centre director” and upload under "Attachments/Other items" in the application form.

- If a group leader is not employed in Norway at the time of the application deadline, submit a signed confirmation from the group leader. Use the template “Confirmation group leader” and upload under "Attachments/Other items" in the application form.

- If the centre has a non-Norwegian collaborating partner, submit a signed letters of intent from the rector/top director of the research organisation, stating that the research organization intends to sign a collaboration agreement with the host institution in the case that the centre is funded. Upload “Attachments/Confirmation from partners” in the application form. No attachments are to be uploaded under “Partner information”.

**Optional attachment**

- A proposal for up to three impartial international experts (include name, title, and affiliation) who can be used to review the grant application if the proposed centre is invited to advance to Phase 2. For interdisciplinary grant applications, applicants are encouraged to propose interdisciplinary experts or experts in all disciplines relevant to the grant application. The Research Council is not under any obligation to use the proposed referees, but may use them as needed.

CVs + track records that exceed four pages combined will not be included in the application review process.

Attachments other than those specified above as mandatory or optional will not be included in the application review process.

**Assessment criteria**

The assessment criteria have been translated from English into Norwegian. It is the English-language version that will be used in the application review process, and grant applications should respond only to the English assessment criteria.

Grant applications will be assessed in relation to the following criteria:

**Excellence**

Novelty
The extent to which:
- the proposed research addresses important research challenges that will have great impact on international research themes and/or research methods.
- the objectives are ambitious and beyond the state-of-the-art (e.g. novel concepts and approaches, development of novel methodology or development between or across disciplines).
- the proposed research has the potential to achieve ground-breaking results.

Solidity
The extent to which:
- the outlined scientific approach is feasible.
- the proposed research methodologies are appropriate to achieve the scientific
goals of the centre.
• the combination of scientific elements put forward in the proposal is crucial to
address the scope and complexity of the research question.
• appropriate consideration has been given to ethical issues, safety issues and
gender dimensions in the research content (Phase 2 only).

Impact
The extent to which:
• the centre will contribute to the development of an internationally leading
research environment in Norway.
• the centre will create an environment that will attract and train research talents
beyond what could be attained in the individual research groups (Phase 2 only).

The quality and scope of communication and engagement activities with
different target audiences (Phase 2 only).

Implementation
Centre director and group leaders
Centre director
The extent to which:
• the centre director has demonstrated the ability to conduct ground-breaking
research.
• the centre director has the required scientific expertise and capacity to
successfully lead the centre.
• the centre director has demonstrated sound leadership in the training and
advancement of young scientist.

Group leaders, for which CVs are submitted
The extent to which:
• the group leaders have demonstrated the ability to conduct ground-breaking
research.
• the group leaders have the required scientific expertise and capacity to
successfully execute the project.

Does at least one of the group leaders, in addition to the centre director, have
an accomplished track record?

Centre organisation
The extent to which:
• the proposal goes beyond what the individual group leaders could achieve
alone.
• the group successfully demonstrates in the proposal that it brings together the
elements – such as skills, knowledge, experience, expertise, disciplines,
methods, approaches, teams – necessary to address the proposed research
question (Phase 2 only).
• the management structures and governance are appropriate (Phase 2 only).
• the physical organisation of the centre is optimal for the scientific collaboration
and a fertile student environment (Phase 2 only).

If the group consisting of the centre director and the group leaders is
characterised by gender imbalance, are the plans to support development of
research talents of the under-represented gender towards qualification for
senior-level positions appropriate (Phase 2 only)?
Overall assessment of the scientific committee

Overall assessment of the scientific committee based, on the criteria Excellence, Impact and Implementation. (Phase 1 only).

The scientific committee will rank a grant application with a female centre director highest when grant applications are otherwise considered equally good according to the assessment criteria (moderate gender quota).

Administrative procedures

Application assessment process for SFF-V, Phase 1

The scientific committee for Phase 1

Grant applications submitted under Phase 1 will be assessed by a scientific committee comprised of three subcommittees. The consolidated scientific committee recommends which applicants should be invited to advance to Phase 2.

The members of the scientific committee will not have specialist expertise in the thematic area of each grant application, but are to have extensive research experience at a high international level as well as experience leading large-scale research activity. None of the members may be an employee in a permanent position in Norway. Each subcommittee will have approximately 11 members, and the consolidated scientific committee will comprise approximately 33 members.

The names of the members will be published on the SFF scheme webpages as soon as all members have been appointed, and before the application submission deadline.

Three subcommittees

The scientific committee for Phase 1 will comprise three subcommittees:

- Humanities and Social Sciences;
- Life Sciences;
- Natural Sciences and Technology.

The meetings of each the three subcommittees will be virtual meetings that are held simultaneously. Each grant application will be discussed primarily in one or two subcommittees. The committee members are to read the grant applications prior to the meeting. An assessor will be assigned for each grant application along with at least three additional committee members who are to deliver a written assessment in relation to each of the assessment criteria. At the meeting, each grant application will be discussed, and a brief joint assessment from the subcommittee will be prepared.

The subcommittees assign a mark for each assessment criteria as well as a discretionary overall mark. The scientific committee is to rank grant applications with a woman centre director highest when all other factors relating to the assessment criteria are essentially equal (moderate gender quotas).

Each subcommittee will draw up a list of grant applications that it recommends for advancement to Phase 2.

Assessment process for interdisciplinary applications in Phase 1
On page 1 of the project description, centre directors must specify which of the three subcommittees they wish to have assess their grant application. Each subcommittee is comprised of members from a wide range of fields and will therefore also assess some interdisciplinary grant applications. Other interdisciplinary proposals may extend across multiple subcommittees, and in these cases the centre director may select two subcommittees for the review process, specifying one as the primary subcommittee. In these cases, each subcommittee will focus on the research that falls within its area of expertise. If one of the subcommittees finds the grant application to be “very good”, an interdisciplinary panel will be set up with 4–6 committee members who have each been responsible for providing a written assessment of that grant application. The interdisciplinary panel’s joint assessment will be returned to the primary subcommittee, which will take this assessment into consideration when drawing up its list of grant applications to recommend for advancement to Phase 2.

Meetings of the scientific committee for Phase 1

Once all the grant applications have been discussed in subcommittees and interdisciplinary panels, and the subcommittees have drawn up their lists of recommendations, the subcommittees will all come together for a joint meeting. This consolidated scientific committee will propose a final list of applicants to be invited to advance to Phase 2. The consolidated scientific committee has the discretion to select a somewhat higher number of grant applications from one subcommittee than from another, depending on the number of applications under the subcommittees and the discussions regarding quality. It is also the responsibility of the consolidated scientific committee to ensure that very good applications that have been reviewed by two subcommittees receive the necessary attention in the joint discussions.

Approximately three times as many grant applications as can be funded may be invited to submit a full application in Phase 2. The consolidated scientific committee will approve a list of applicants that in their opinion should be invited to advance to Phase 2.

Final decision in Phase 1

The Executive Board of the Research Council will determine whether to approve the application assessment process for Phase 1. If the process is approved, the Board will take the final decisions regarding which applicants from the scientific committee’s list are to be invited to advance to Phase 2. The impartiality of the Board members will be verified in advance. It may be necessary to appoint substitute members to the Board.

Feedback to applicants after Phase 1

The brief joint assessment prepared for each grant application in the subcommittees will be sent as feedback to all applicants, along with the marks for each criterion and the overall mark. Applicants not invited to participate in Phase 2 will not receive any additional scientific explanation of why their grant application was rejected.

Application assessment process for SFF-V, Phase 2

First, each grant application in Phase 2 will be assessed by a referee panel.

Three individual experts (peer reviewers) with specialist expertise will assess
Each of the three experts is first to prepare his/her individual assessment of the grant application. Then they will form a referee panel that communicates electronically and produces an overall panel assessment of the grant application, assigning marks for each of the three assessment criteria: **Excellence, Impact and Implementation**. If one or more panel members has a dissenting opinion regarding one or more of the criteria, this must be clearly stated in the overall panel assessment. In case of a dissenting opinion, the grant application will not be assigned a single mark that is an average of all the marks, but instead the range of marks will be presented.

Applicants will be sent the referee panel's preliminary assessment and marks and will have the opportunity to answer questions and clarify any misunderstanding of a scientific nature in the panel's assessment. These comments will then be returned to the panel, which may choose whether to take the comments into account in its final assessment.

Please note that the referee panel assigning the assessment and mark has only reviewed a single grant application and has therefore been unable to compare it with the other proposals.

Applicants will be informed of the names of the international referees when Phase 2 of the application assessment process is concluded.

**Scientific committee for Phase 2**

The scientific committee for Phase 2 will comprise nine members with backgrounds in a broad range of research fields at a high international level and experience in heading large-scale research activities. None of the members may be an employee in a permanent position in Norway, and none will have been involved in the Phase 1 scientific committee or the referee panels. There will be three members from the humanities and social sciences community, three from the life sciences community, and three from the natural sciences and technology community.

The members’ names will be published on the SFF scheme webpages as soon as all members have been appointed.

**Meeting of the scientific committee for Phase 2**

In Phase 2, the scientific committee will assess the submitted grant applications in relation to each other. The referee panels assigning the assessments and marks have only reviewed a single grant application and have therefore been unable to compare the level of each application with the level of the other grant applications. It is therefore possible that the scientific committee may rank applications with high marks from the referee panel below applications that received lower marks.

The scientific committee will review the grant applications, the referee panels’ assessments and the applicants’ comments. The committee’s task is to compare and rank the grant applications. The committee will conduct interviews with all of the centre directors in Phase 2. The interviews will last 20 minutes per proposal and seek to obtain answers to the committee’s questions about the proposal.
addition, the interview will focus on how well the centre director is suited for the task of leading the proposed centre. The committee is not to give consideration to scientific discipline when ranking the grant applications. Nevertheless, the composition of the committee will likely result in a fairly even distribution of highly ranked applications from the humanities and social sciences, life sciences, and natural sciences and technology.

The scientific committee is to rank grant applications with a woman centre director highest when all other factors relating to the assessment criteria are essentially equal (moderate gender quotas).

The committee will draw up a list of grant applications recommended for SFF centre status and funding.

**Final decision in Phase 2**

The Executive Board of the Research Council will determine whether to approve the application assessment process for Phase 2. If the process is approved, the Board will take the final decisions regarding funding of centres based on the ranked list from the scientific committee for Phase 2. The Executive Board will decide how many centres are to be granted SFF status. The impartiality of the Board members must be verified in advance, and substitute members may need to be appointed.

**Feedback to applicants after Phase 2**

The feedback to the applicants in Phase 2 will consist of the final assessment from the referee panel and a brief statement from the scientific committee for Phase 2.

**Download templates**

- SFF-V Template for Project Description - Phase 1.docx
- SFF-V CV + 10 year track record template.docx
- SFF-V cv + early achievements template.docx
- SFF-V 10-year budget_.xlsx
- SFF-V Confirmation-centre director.docx
- SFF-V confirmation group leader.docx

Download all templates