

THE CENTRES OF EXCELLENCE SCHEME (SFF) REQUIREMENTS AND GUIDELINES¹

1 Purpose of this document

- 1.1 This document specifies the requirements and guidelines underlying the Norwegian Centres of Excellence scheme, hereafter also referred to as “SFF”, “the SFF scheme”, “Centre of Excellence”, “Centres of Excellence”, “centre”, “centres” or “the centres”.
- 1.2 This document forms the basis for the contract to be entered into between the Research Council of Norway and the individual host institutions for the centres, cf. the definition in Section 2.3, once SFF status and funding have been granted.
- 1.3 When assessing applications for SFF status and funding and when entering into contracts to establish the centres, the Research Council of Norway will attach importance to compliance with the requirements and guidelines laid down in this document.

2 General information about the SFF scheme

- 2.1 The Centres of Excellence (SFF) scheme is a national scheme under the auspices of the Research Council of Norway. The Research Council of Norway provides the basic funding for the scheme with allocations from the annual yield of the Fund for Research and Innovation.
- 2.2 The objective of the SFF scheme is to establish time-limited research centres that conduct targeted, focused, long-term research of high international calibre and where researcher training is an integral component. Scientific merit is the main criterion used in the selection of the centres.
- 2.3 A Centre of Excellence is a time-limited research centre affiliated with a research institution that is responsible for the centre’s activities, hereafter known as the “host institution”. SFF host institutions may be universities (including university hospitals), university colleges or independent research institutes that have the resources needed to fulfil the requirements set out for the SFF scheme. The host institution must serve as the formal applicant for SFF status and funding, act as the Project Owner in any contract signed with the Research Council of Norway regarding the centre, cf. Section 1.2, and bear the practical, scientific and financial responsibility for the establishment, operation and closing down of the centre. The agreement entitles the host institution to designate the centre as a Centre of Excellence and to use the Research Council’s SFF logo.

¹ Revised February 2011. Applies to the SFF centres established after the 2011 call for proposals under the SFF scheme (SFF-III).

- 2.4 The host institution for a centre may cooperate with one or more research institutions, organisations or enterprises on the establishment, operation and financing of the centre. These participants are referred to as “partners”. Moreover, the centre may have subcontractors that provide it with services. Even though a host institution cooperates with other players on the establishment and operation of a centre, the fact remains that it is the host institution which serves as the formal applicant vis-à-vis the Research Council of Norway with regard to SFF status and funding, is party to any contract signed with the Research Council of Norway, and bears the practical, scientific and financial responsibility for the establishment, operation and closing down of the centre, cf. Section 2.3.

3 SFF consortium

- 3.1 A group consisting of the host institution for a centre and one or more partners, cf. Section 2.4, is referred to as a “SFF consortium” and the partners are referred to as “consortium participants”. Consortium participants must contribute by performing R&D activities and/or by providing financing in accordance with the funding plan for the centre, cf. Section 11.1, with a view to achieving the results outlined in the project description, cf. Section 4. To ensure sufficient flexibility, the SFF scheme will allow changes in the composition of the partners in a SFF consortium over time in accordance with the rules set out in the provisions of the consortium agreement, cf. Sections 3.2 and 11.5.
- 3.2 The host institution is responsible for ensuring that a consortium agreement is drawn up between the participants in the SFF consortium. The consortium agreement is to regulate the organisation and implementation of cooperation within the consortium, and stipulate the reciprocal rights and obligations of the participants. The consortium agreement must include, among other things, provisions specifying the participants’ obligations to contribute resources in accordance with the centre’s funding plan, cf. Section 11.2; rules regarding the opportunity to join and withdraw from the SFF consortium, cf. Section 11.5; rules related to employer’s liability, cf. Section 9.1; and provisions on the right of ownership, right of use, licensing, publication of project results and confidentiality, cf. Section 13.
- 3.3 The host institution is responsible for ensuring that the consortium agreement is in keeping with the principles set forth in this document and the General Terms and Conditions for R&D Projects issued by the Research Council of Norway. A provision establishing this must be included in the consortium agreement. Knowledge on the part of the Research Council of a consortium agreement in no way implies its approval of any deviations from the principles in this document or from the Research Council’s General Terms and Conditions for R&D Projects. The consortium agreement must be submitted to the Research Council for informational purposes and is to be attached to any contract on the establishment and operation of the centre entered into between the Research Council and the host institution, cf. Section 1.2.

4 Project description, etc.

The Centre of Excellence is established for the purpose of performing the activities presented in the project description pursuant to the contract between the Research Council of Norway and the host institution, cf. Section 1.2. The project description governs the centre's activities and must specify the primary objective, secondary objectives and progress plan for the research activities described in the SFF application, and must cover the entire first five-year period and the potential subsequent five-year period of the centre's activity, cf. Section 14.1. Further, there must be a dissemination plan that describes the centre's dissemination measures in accordance with Section 8.1 of the Research Council's General Terms and Conditions for R&D Projects. The project description and dissemination plan must be attached to any contract on the establishment, operation and closing down of the centre entered into between the Research Council of Norway and the host institution, cf. Section 1.2.

5 Funding announcement and grant applications

The Research Council of Norway will issue guidelines for funding announcements, application processing and the criteria for application assessment. Applications are to be submitted by the host institution for the individual centre. The Executive Board of the Research Council of Norway, or a party authorised by the Executive Board, will take the final decision regarding selection of the centres.

6 Organisation

- 6.1 The SFF scheme is based on a model in which the centre is to be a part of the host institution's organisation. The centre must be organised to achieve the objectives specified in the project description in an effective manner, have a form of organisation and governance that is well adapted to the host institution's organisation, and establish routines that ensure good interaction with partners in the SFF consortium, if any, cf. Section 3.1.
- 6.2 The interests of the centre relative to those of the host institution and any consortium participants must be adequately safeguarded; among other things, the centre must have strong top-level management with a high degree of scientific and administrative autonomy within the parameters of the project description, the cost and funding plan as well as the centre's staffing framework. The centre is to have a satisfactory administrative support system.
- 6.3 In the event a centre is awarded SFF status and funding, the host institution must prepare a report describing how the requirements and guidelines in this section are being addressed.

7 Location

- 7.1 As a general rule, the centre is to consist of research groups located at the same site. The phrase "located at the same site" is understood to refer to collaboration between research groups or individual researchers who work in the same building complex.

- 7.2 The SFF scheme also allows the establishment of “virtual” centres. A virtual centre is based on collaboration between research groups which are not located at the same site, but are a greater or lesser physical distance apart, and which have effective communication systems and systems for exchanging personnel between the various segments of the virtual centre. Virtual centres are required to have a common administration and a single research plan in keeping with the project description.
- 7.3 All centres, both those located at the same site and virtual centres, are required to maintain close contacts with leading national and international research groups.
- 7.4 In the event a centre is awarded SFF status and funding, the host institution must prepare a report describing how the requirements and guidelines in this section are being addressed.

8 Governance and administration

- 8.1 The centre may be governed by the host institution’s governing bodies or have its own board. If the centre involves several partners and is organised as a SFF consortium, cf. Section 3.1, the centre must have its own board. In cases where staff members from several faculties at a single university or university college are affiliated with the centre, the centre should also have its own board. The board of the centre is to consist of representatives of the consortium participants, pursuant to the provisions of the consortium agreement, cf. Section 3.2.
- 8.2 The board’s main responsibility is to ensure that the intentions and plans underlying the contract for the establishment of the centre are fulfilled, cf. Section 1.2, and in particular that the activities described in the project description are performed within the stipulated budget and time frameworks. The board is to ensure that cooperation proceeds smoothly between the centre, the host institution and the partners in the SFF consortium, if any, cf. Section 6.1, and in particular must ensure that the host institution, through its representation on the centre’s board and through the centre’s administration, can influence factors of importance to cooperation between the centre and the host institution.
- 8.3 The centre is to be headed by a director. The centre director is to serve as project manager pursuant to the contract between the Research Council of Norway and the host institution, cf. Section 1.2. The centre director must be one of the prominent researchers responsible for the centre attaining SFF status and the prestige associated with it. The director is to have considerable independence in relation to scientific contexts as well as on questions involving the recruitment of staff to the centre. The director and members of the management group, if any, will be appointed by the host institution in consultation with the other participants in the SFF consortium, if any.
- 8.4 The host institution is responsible for ensuring that clear guidelines regarding responsibility and authority are established for the centre’s activities, including the board’s powers of authority, rules for representation on the board and a description of the director’s powers of authority.

- 8.5 In the event a centre is awarded SFF status and funding, the host institution must prepare a report describing how the requirements and guidelines in this section are being addressed.

9 Staffing and responsibility for human resources

- 9.1 The centre is to be developed around researchers who have already demonstrated the potential for a high level of scientific achievement. When assessing the centre's plans, more importance will be attached to the potential to conduct innovative, scientific activities than to the previous scholarly production of key scientific personnel. It should be possible to work at a centre part-time, and staff members should be allowed to perform some of their previous duties at the collaborating institutions and enterprises, e.g. teaching, commissioned research and other ordinary activities. The host institution and the other participants in the SFF consortium, if any, are to decide among themselves how to handle the employer's responsibility for staff at the centre, cf. Section 3.2.
- 9.2 An important part of the centre's activities will be to provide researcher training in its field. Recruitment should include master's and doctoral students as well as post-doctoral research fellows. If the host institution is not authorised to confer master's and doctoral degrees itself, it must have a collaboration agreement with institutions that can.
- 9.3 When recruiting personnel, the centre is required to incorporate gender equality perspectives and actively strive to attract outstanding national and international researchers. In particular, the centre is to facilitate the exchange of staff members between consortium participants, if any, and international partners.
- 9.4 In the event a centre is awarded SFF status and funding, the host institution must prepare a report describing how the requirements and guidelines in this section are being addressed.

10 Distribution of responsibility between the Research Council of Norway and the host institution

- 10.1 The Research Council of Norway is responsible for providing basic funding for the SFF scheme, supervising the selection of the centres, drawing up uniform contracts for the centres, following up the centres on an ongoing basis in accordance with Research Council practice, performing evaluations and taking decisions on whether to extend a contract for a second five-year period.
- 10.2 The host institution is the party to the contract with the Research Council of Norway and bears the practical, scientific and financial responsibility for establishing, implementing and closing down the activities of the centre pursuant to the contract between the Research Council and the host institution, cf. Sections 1.2 and 2.3. The host institution is responsible for drawing up plans to safeguard the SFF investment in the long term, including after the cessation of the Research Council's funding of the centre. The host institution will usually be the largest supplier of scientific staff to the centre,

and is expected to provide administrative support, appropriate premises and other infrastructure for the centre.

11 Financing

- 11.1 In its application for SFF status and funding, the host institution must submit, in addition to a project description, cf. Section 4, a cost and funding plan for the centre's first five-year period and potential subsequent five-year period, cf. Section 14.1. If funding is granted, these plans will form the basis for the contract on the establishment and operation of the centre between the Research Council and the host institution, cf. Section 1.2, and must be attached to that contract.
- 11.2 The funding plan is to be based on the principle that the Research Council of Norway in conjunction with the host institution, or with a SFF consortium consisting of the host institution and its partners, will jointly provide the resources required to perform the centre's activities, cf. Section 3.1. When selecting the centres, the Research Council will take into account the ability of the host institution and any consortium participants to contribute their own resources to the centre and will attach importance to the type of contribution they can provide. The Research Council requires that letters of intent from the planned SFF consortium participants regarding their participation in the financing of the centre during the first five-year period are attached to the final application for SFF status and funding.
- 11.3 Contributions may be provided in the form of own financing, staff placed at the disposal of the centre and/or essential infrastructure. The Research Council of Norway requires that the host institution and any consortium participants cover expenses for the premises, electricity, heating and other infrastructure for the centre, and that a reasonable amount of scientific equipment be placed at the disposal of the centre. Research funding that promotes the centre's activities, e.g. EU funding, project or strategic grants from the Research Council or other sources, may be counted toward the required contribution.
- 11.4 Upon signing the contract with the host institution, the Research Council of Norway will specify its grant to the centre for the first year of operations as well as the date on which the disbursement of funds will be effected. At the same time, the Research Council of Norway will issue a pledge for each year of the first five-year period, cf. Section 14.1. The overall budgetary framework for the first five-year period must be broken down by individual years so that the centre's activities may achieve the desired profile in accordance with the plans set forth in the project description. The Research Council reserves the right to adjust the annual pledges based on the centre's progress report, cf. Section 12.3, and any adjustments in a centre's funding plan and project description as a result of changes in research focus or the funding base. Pledges for a potential final five-year period will be made subsequent to any decision to extend the centre's period of operation, cf. Section 14.1. Allocations from the Research Council of Norway may be transferred from one year to the next.
- 11.5 The SFF scheme will allow changes in the composition of the partners in a SFF consortium over time in accordance with the rules set out in the provisions of the consortium agreement, cf. Section 3.1. Withdrawal from a consortium requires at least six

months' notice. If the withdrawal of a consortium participant leads to a reduction in funding and loss of essential expertise, the centre's board must attempt to secure the resources needed to achieve the objectives stated in the project description. If the changes in the consortium mean that key conditions for the establishment of the centre are no longer met or have been altered significantly, the Research Council is entitled to terminate the contract with the host institution, cf. Section 14.3.

12 Scientific and administrative follow-up

- 12.1 The host institution must submit a progress report using the eRapport electronic reporting system of the Research Council of Norway by no later than 1 March of each year. The report must contain detailed information on scientific, financial and administrative factors as input for the Research Council's annual report to the ministries for the previous year.
- 12.2 The host institution must submit an annual report for the previous year to the Research Council of Norway by no later than 1 April of each year. The report must contain a description of the centre's scientific activities, a profit and loss account with notes and an auditor's report prepared by the host institution's auditor. Centres whose host institutions are audited by the Office of the Auditor General are exempt from submitting an auditor's report.
- 12.3 In consultation with the host institution, the Research Council of Norway will organise "site visits" of the centre at appropriate intervals. Based on the annual reports, the Research Council will perform a review of the progress made in the preceding year and the plans for the future. Representatives of the host institution and other SFF consortium participants, if any, the centre's board, the centre's management and the Research Council of Norway must be present. The Research Council may also invite Norwegian or international experts to participate in the meeting and comment on the progress and the plans.
- 12.4 About 3 ½ years after the centres are established, a midterm evaluation of each centre is to be conducted under the auspices of the Research Council of Norway. The evaluation will be conducted using a common process for all the centres and on the basis of a mandate decided by the Research Council's governing bodies. The evaluation is to assess the scientific results achieved by the centres relative to the original project description. Further, the evaluation is to assess the plans for the centres' scientific activities in the potential final five-year period. In addition, the Research Council of Norway will evaluate the administrative framework at each centre. The Research Council will draw up the mandate for the evaluation, which will primarily be based on the same principles and aspects for evaluation as those used in the previous midterm evaluations of the individual centres.²
- 12.5 The midterm evaluation will form the basis for the decision regarding whether to continue the individual centre for the remainder of the total 10-year period or to terminate the centre's SFF funding and status after five years, cf. Section 14.1. The Executive

² "Midterm evaluation of eight Centres of Excellence (SFF-II) – Terms of reference". 26 May 2010. Approved by the Research Board of the Division for Science, 17 June 2010.

Board of the Research Council of Norway, or a party authorised by the Executive Board, will take the final decision on the matter.

13 Right of ownership, right of use, licensing, publication of project results and confidentiality

The SFF scheme is regulated by the Research Council of Norway's General Terms and Conditions for R&D Projects regarding the right of ownership, right of use, licensing, publication of project results and confidentiality. If the centre is organised as a SFF consortium, cf. Section 3.1, the consortium agreement must contain provisions that govern these areas pursuant to the General Terms and Conditions for R&D Projects.

14 The centres' period of operation – cessation of SFF funding from the Research Council

- 14.1 Research Council funding for each centre is provided for a period of up to 10 years from the start-up date. A midterm evaluation of each centre will be conducted under the auspices of the Research Council approximately 3 ½ years after start-up, cf. Section 12.5. If the evaluation has a negative outcome, the centre's funding will be discontinued five years after the start-up date. If the evaluation is positive, the centre's period of operation will be extended to 10 years. Once SFF funding from the Research Council has ceased, be it after five or 10 years, the centre will no longer be part of the Centres of Excellence (SFF) scheme.
- 14.2 The Research Council of Norway will establish criteria for the evaluation and the decisions that will form the basis of the termination or extension of the centres after five years, cf. Section 12.5. The host institution must pay special attention to personnel-related factors when closing down a centre. In particular, upon cessation of activity, a host institution must ensure that master's and doctoral students have the opportunity to pursue and complete their study programmes on schedule.
- 14.3 The host institution must ensure that plans are drawn up to effectively utilise the expertise and value added generated by the research activity under the SFF scheme in the long term.
- 14.4 Should a situation arise due to research-related, financial or other reasons which materially alters the assumptions underlying the establishment of a centre or means that a centre can generally no longer be operated on the basis of the principles described in this document, the Research Council of Norway is entitled to terminate the contract with the host institution pursuant to the provisions in the Research Council's General Terms and Conditions for R&D Projects, including the withdrawal of funding and SFF status.