

## SFI's guidance on the Post Award Management of its Grants during the COVID-19 crisis.

Updated: 05/02/2021

### Forward

Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) fully appreciates the significant impact that COVID-19 is having on our research community. In March 2020, SFI, in conjunction with our colleagues at the Irish Research Council (IRC) and the Health Research Board (HRB) issued a [joint statement](#) setting out the immediate actions being undertaken by the agencies and initial guidance points on areas specific to our respective communities. We have continued to closely examine the current and potential future implications of the COVID-19 crisis and are now providing further guidance to SFI Grant holders on how to best manage the programmes of research associated with their SFI funding during this time.

Given the unprecedented situation we are in, there are many unknowns relating to the COVID-19 pandemic, including the length of time that the lockdown will be in place and the disruption to 'normal' research activities. SFI is sympathetic to the needs of our funded researchers and will be flexible in allowing budget reallocations and no cost extensions where required. For all Grants in SFI's portfolio, postdoctoral researcher salaries and PhD stipends / fees should continue to be paid in line with commitments made under the respective SFI Grant Letters of Offer / Terms & Conditions (T&Cs).

We have reviewed our live portfolio of Grants, with a specific focus on salaries and postgraduate stipends and the associated budget that would be required to provide costed extensions to awards. Our analysis indicates that SFI is not in a position to provide costed extensions on Grants at present, as this would require substantial additional budget that is currently not available and approval from the SFI Board. It should be noted that where Grants have been jointly awarded under a research partnership programme with another funding agency, the lead funding agency's T&Cs / policies shall apply.

SFI has very successfully transitioned to a remote working environment and we have been able to operate business as usual. We continue to award Grants and have recently informed applicants to the SFI Frontiers for the Future Programme of the outcome of the review process. We have also commenced awarding Grants from the COVID-19 Rapid Response call. For the recipients of these Grants and their respective Research Bodies, an opportunity exists to forward plan and consider assigning team positions to available personnel, particularly those who have come out or will be coming out of their current contracts over the coming months.

With respect to the current portfolio of Grants, SFI is committed to being as flexible as possible and have thus described below various approaches that we encourage our Grant holders and their respective Research Bodies to consider in managing their programmes of research as effectively as possible and enabling forward planning, during this challenging period.

We encourage our funded researchers to speak with their programme managers, as we continue to track, respond to, and monitor issues as they arise. We will continue to collaborate with our colleagues in other funding agencies and Government Departments and will update this guidance page as we move forward into the next phases of the crisis.

Should you have any queries that are not currently covered by this existent guidance, we encourage you to contact your Scientific Programme Manager or the mailbox that is relevant to your award.

## 1. Reporting Compliance Policy

SFI expects both Grant holders and their respective Research Bodies to endeavour to progress their research programmes as best as possible under the current circumstances. However, in recognition of current constraints, **SFI's Reporting Compliance Policy** has been paused, as of 31/03/2020. This means that no penalty points will be applied to late submissions of scientific reports from this date going forward. We would however strongly encourage all Grant holders to submit their reports as close as possible to the original deadline. The decision to reinstate the Reporting Compliance Policy will be reviewed in due course and we will communicate any such changes with Grant holders and Research Bodies at that time.

**Please note:** As of 01/01/2021, the Reporting Compliance Policy has been reinstated – see link for further information: <https://www.sfi.ie/funding/award-management/reporting-compliance/>

## 2. Scientific Reporting Deadlines

In recognition of the current constraints imposed by the lock-down, particularly where researchers may have young families or dependents to care for, SFI has applied an automatic 90-day extension to all scientific reports due between 31/03/2020 and 30/06/2020. We would however strongly encourage all Grant holders to submit their reports as close as possible to the original deadline, since progress and final reporting is closely linked with continued payments on awards and supports SFI in managing its Grant profiling.

In the case of late financial reports, we would encourage you to contact your respective Finance Offices who will liaise with SFI personnel directly.

## 3. No Cost Extensions

SFI researchers can apply for a **No Cost Extension (NCE)** if they require additional time to complete their project beyond the existing end date in the Letter of Offer (LoO). Typically, a maximum of six months is permitted, however, it is likely that SFI will permit longer periods of NCE. Please contact your Scientific Programme Manager/SFI if further information and / or guidance is required. As per the policy a request for a NCE should be made when there are typically 3-6 months remaining on the award to allow for appropriate and timely planning but with consideration of the current constraints, SFI will accept applications outside of this time frame. Please consider some of the suggested 'cost saving' measures described below under '*Changes to the Original Grant-approved Budget*' to ensure that key personnel can be financially supported during the NCE period and moreover, that post graduate students avail of the full 4-year term of their training (this should not include the period that they have not been able to undertake their research owing to the lockdown).

<https://www.sfi.ie/funding/sfi-policies-and-guidance/budget-finance-related-policies/>

Please note that for recently funded Grants whose LoOs have already been issued, it should be possible to accommodate unavoidable delays in research programme start dates by availing of a NCE closer to the term of the award. Where LoOs have not yet been issued but the Grantee has received a Letter of Notification, a request can be made to delay the start date of the awarded Grant, prior to the issuance of the LoO.

#### ***4. SFI's position on salary and stipend payments***

For the avoidance of doubt, SFI supports the continuance of salary / stipend payments which are funded through its Grants. It is our expectation that research activities such as desk-based research, data analysis, modelling, online teaching, administration work, writing of papers, theses, reports, and grant proposals can all be progressed in a working-from-home environment. SFI recognises that these are all valuable contributions to the programme of research funded under the Grant.

If research staff funded on SFI grants are redeployed to support front line HSE activities, SFI will hold the SFI salary in abeyance until the researcher returns to their host Research Body. Their salary budget line can then be used to support them and the associated research activities as part of a No Cost Extension.

#### ***5. Changes to the Original Grant-approved Budget***

As per SFI's GT&Cs, SFI Grant holders may reallocate up to €20,000 of their approved budget without pre-authorisation from SFI. As SFI is encouraging you to review the research programme associated with your current (approved) Grant award budget, it is likely that you may need to exceed this amount. Reallocations exceeding this amount must be approved, in advance, by SFI, as it could affect our ability to profile payments and manage our overall budget expenditure in year. We ask that you review SFI's Budget Reallocation guidance on its website and / or contact your Scientific Programme Manager for further support.

<https://www.sfi.ie/funding/sfi-policies-and-guidance/budget-finance-related-policies/>

As the Grant holder, you may wish to consider some cost saving measures which you could apply to your research programme to ensure that funds can be re-allocated to support a No Cost Extension on your Grant (see Section 1 above). All changes should be discussed with your SPM and will need to be approved, in writing, by SFI.

- Reviewing budget lines associated with travel.
- Reviewing requirements for materials and consumables to identify potential savings as per Section 4 of SFI's Grant Budget Policy.
- Reviewing cost savings associated with the reduction in overhead used during the period of 'lock-down'.
- With consideration of the original timelines associated with certain work-packages, review whether all original proposed Grant activities should still be undertaken i.e. will the proposed research still be current or state of art.
- SFI encourages both Grant holders and their respective Research Bodies to endeavour to progress their research programmes as best possible. It is our expectation that research activities such as desk-based research, data analysis, modelling, online teaching, administration work, writing of papers, theses, reports, and grant proposals can all be progressed in a working-from-home environment. SFI recognises that these are all valuable contributions to the programme of research funded under the Grant.

- SFI understands that there may be some cases where progress on the research programme is impaired and will be flexible on the expected timelines associated with the research programme's outputs, considering the delays incurred.
- Where a Grant has been awarded for the purpose of a Conference or Workshop that has now been cancelled, we ask that you contact your SPM or the programme mailbox directly.

## **6. Open Access Policy**

SFI is currently reviewing existing timelines for implementing its **Open Access Policy**. It is likely that the date for compliance with this policy will apply to papers submitted for peer-review / publication *after* 01 January 2021. Additional guidance will be provided over the coming months as we work closely with our colleagues in cOAlition S<sup>1</sup>.

## **7. Research Integrity Training**

SFI's revised (2019) Grant Terms & Conditions currently mandate that all team members undertake training in Research Integrity within six months of the start date of the award or within 6 months of joining the team. Although the training provided by **Epigeum** is effectively on-line, we will accept that there may be delays in accessing this training due to circumstances that are outside of your control.

## **8. Other queries not addressed in this guidance**

For any other queries not addressed in this guidance, such as those related to the SFI Discover Programme or those bespoke to Research Centres, Strategic Partnerships and Industry Fellowship Grants, please contact the respective SFI mailboxes directly.

If in doubt, contact [info@sfi.ie](mailto:info@sfi.ie)

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.coalition-s.org/>