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Spark Regulations

of 28 January 2020

The National Research Council,
based on Articles 3 and 48 of the Funding Regulations of 27 February 2015¹
issues the following Regulations:

1. General provisions

Article 1 Objectives and principles

¹The Spark funding scheme of the Swiss National Science Foundation (hereinafter "the SNSF") offers qualified researchers the opportunity to develop and test independently and on their own responsibility new and unconventional scientific approaches, methods, theories, standards and ideas. The scheme is aimed at funding promising and original ideas, which are based on little or no existing data and which can be developed and tested without delay. Risk-taking is expressly encouraged but not a condition *per se*. Hence, negative results will also be regarded as knowledge gained.

²Funding will focus on the unconventional nature of the research project and the originality of the research idea as well as on the project's scientific quality, but not on the appraisal of the person conducting the project. Nevertheless, applicants must be able to show that they have the expertise needed to carry out the project. The project description submitted by the applicant must be fully anonymised.

³Projects conducted for directly commercial purposes will not be funded.

⁴Spark is open to all disciplines.

Article 2 Applicable law

Spark applications must be in line with these Regulations. In addition, the other regulations of the SNSF apply, in particular the Funding Regulations¹ and their General Implementation Regulations².

¹ [Regulations of the Swiss National Science Foundation on research grants](#)

² [General implementation regulations for the Funding Regulations](#)

Article 3 Duration, amount and extended duration

¹ Spark grants are awarded for a duration of 6 to 12 months.

² The funding awarded with a Spark grant ranges from a minimum of 50,000 to a maximum of 100,000 Swiss francs. The SNSF does not consider any funding applications outside this range.

³ A Spark grant may last for up to two years, if justified for scientific reasons. In such cases, the reasons why a longer funding period is needed must be expressly stated in the application. The funding awarded under the grant, however, cannot be increased. The SNSF does not consider applications that request a longer duration but do not provide sufficient reasons for the extension.

2. Requirements for applicants, applications

Article 4 Personal requirements for applicants

¹ The applicants must conduct the Spark project at a Swiss research institution. Institutions pursuant to Articles 4 and 5 of the Research and Innovation Promotion Act (RIPA)³ are eligible. This includes universities and the two Federal Institutes of Technology, universities of applied sciences, universities of teacher education, other accredited higher education institutions, and non-commercial research centres outside academia.

² Natural persons holding a doctorate (PhD or MD-PhD) are eligible to submit an application. Doctoral students are not eligible. Applicants without a doctorate must generally have completed three years of research work as their main source of income since obtaining their higher education degree. Such research work will be regarded as equivalent to a doctorate.

³ A Spark application may only be submitted by one applicant, and not by two or more.

⁴ Applicants must be

- a. the “Spiritus Rector” behind the project;
- b. able to conduct the project without any instructions from third parties;
- c. in a position to make a substantial contribution to the Spark project.

⁵ Applicants may only submit one application per submission date. Moreover, they may only be involved in one ongoing Spark grant as a grantee.

⁶ Applicants whose application was scientifically evaluated in a former call are barred from submitting a Spark application during the 12 months following the submission deadline of this former call.

⁷ Applicants must indicate the research location pursuant to paragraph 1 and confirm that they are employed there for the duration of the Spark project, or that they have received a written confirmation from the institution stating that they may conduct the project at the said institution without being employed there. In addition, the infrastructure required to successfully conduct the project must be made available to the applicant for the entire duration of the project.

⁸ Applicants who request that their own salary be financed fully or in part must enclose a written confirmation from the institution confirming their employment situation.

⁹ Employment positions of less than 50% (0.5 FTE) are permissible.

³ [Federal Act on the Promotion of Research and Innovation](#)

Article 5 Spark applications and grants in relation to other SNSF funding schemes

¹ At the time of submission or during an ongoing Spark project, applicants may also receive grants under all other SNSF funding schemes (including the career funding schemes).

² Provided they meet the personal requirements pursuant to Article 4, SNSF-funded project staff may submit Spark applications if they can show that they are able to conduct a Spark project independently and if, in the event of their application being approved, they terminate their employee status before starting their project.

³ It is not permissible to submit the same proposal in more than one SNSF funding scheme. In such cases, the SNSF does not consider the application that was submitted at a later date.

Article 6 Submission of applications

¹ Spark applications must be submitted via the electronic platform *mySNF*. The SNSF announces the opening of the call and the relevant submission deadline for Spark applications on its website.

² Applications must be in English and must include the following information and documents:

- a. administrative information and budget as per the requirements set out in *mySNF*.
- b. an anonymised project description consisting of a project summary (maximum 1 page) and project plan (maximum 5 pages) as per the requirements and structure set out in *mySNF*;
- c. a brief description of the skills and qualifications that enable the applicant to successfully conduct the project, and of the availability of the necessary infrastructure;
- d. written confirmation as provided by a Swiss research institution pursuant to Article 4 paragraph 1 concerning its role as host institution for the duration of the research project. The written confirmation must clearly show that the necessary framework for conducting the project is in place at the institution.
- e. a self-declaration confirming authorship of the submitted application.

³ The project description pursuant to paragraph 2 letter b must comprise the following elements:

1. project summary;
2. Project plan consisting of
 - 2.1. state of research in the field together with a short statement explaining why the proposed research project is original/unconventional;
 - 2.2. detailed description of goals, methods, approach, expected results and potential risks; and
 - 2.3. potential impact of the research project.

⁴ The project description, including metadata of the corresponding document, must be fully anonymised to ensure that the evaluators cannot identify the applicant or any current, previous or future position(s) or institution(s). In particular, the anonymised project-description must not include any obvious references to the applicant's own publications as this could make him/her easily identifiable. The SNSF does not consider applications in which the project description is not fully anonymised, particularly if the identity of applicants or their position(s) or the relevant institution(s) can be determined or if their level of experience can be inferred.

Article 7 Eligible costs

¹ The following costs are covered by a Spark grant:

- a. The applicant's salary. The SNSF fixes the salary together with the institution concerned; it may set salary caps;
- b. the salaries of scientific and technical staff of the research project according to the salary ranges and rates prescribed by the SNSF. Doctoral students may not be employed in Spark projects;
- c. material costs that are directly linked to the research work, particularly expendable items, field expenses, travel costs or third-party charges, the costs of computing time and data as well data access costs (Open Research Data);
- d. direct costs incurred through the use of research infrastructure linked to the research work;
- e. costs for national and international cooperation and networking activities carried out in connection with the funded research.

² The costs must not exceed 100,000 Swiss francs (incl. social security contributions).

³ The requirements for assumption of the costs are set out in separate provisions issued by the SNSF. In particular, the SNSF may set upper limits for individual cost categories.

⁴ The SNSF awards global budgets. Transfers between the individual cost categories during the funding period are permissible.

3. Assessment criteria, procedure, grants

Article 8 Assessment criteria

Spark grants are awarded based on the following criteria:

- a. originality, novelty of the idea;
- b. unconventionality of the proposed research project;
- c. scientific quality of the project;
- d. potential for significant impact.

Article 9 Spark grants

¹ Spark grants are awarded and administered based on these regulations and the other provisions of the SNSF that are applicable to the grant.

² The Spark project must be started no later than four months after the date of the award.

Article 10 Non-consideration

¹ The SNSF does not consider applications from applicants who do not meet all of the specified requirements. The SNSF also rules not to consider the application if the submitted documentation is incomplete or erroneous or if the necessary evidence is not provided or does not meet the specified requirements. The SNSF may grant a limited period of time to correct minor administrative errors and may consider the application if the deadline for correction is met. The project description may

no longer be changed once the submission deadline has expired. The SNSF does not consider applications that contain anonymisation errors (Article 6 paragraph 4); such errors may not be corrected under any circumstances.

² If the examination of the applicants' skills and qualifications described pursuant to Article 6 paragraph 2 letter c shows that the applicant clearly does not meet the requirements for conducting the project, the SNSF does not consider the application.

³ Non-consideration decisions are communicated to the applicants in the form of a ruling.

Article 11 Evaluation process

¹ Proposals are evaluated in a double-blind process by members of an international pool of experts. The experts only evaluate the submitted project description without knowing the applicant's identity, position or institution.

² Each proposal is independently evaluated by two members of the pool. Both experts provide a written assessment.

³ The evaluation pool does not meet to discuss the proposals.

⁴ Proposals are categorised into different funding priorities, based on the two assessments obtained for each proposal.

⁵ If it is not possible to fund all applications that have the same funding priority, preference will be given to applications with a higher score for the criteria "Originality, novelty of idea" and "Unconventionality of proposed research".

Article 12 Decisions

¹ Funding is decided by the Presiding Board of the Research Council.

² Decisions are communicated to the applicants in the form of a ruling.

³ Negative rulings will be justified in summary form. In particular, the applicant will be informed, which assessment criteria (Article 8) have not been sufficiently met based on the evaluation (Article 11).

Article 13 Right of appeal

Applicants have the right to appeal against rulings issued by the SNSF.

4. Reporting, entry into force

Article 14 Reporting

¹ Holders of Spark grants must submit a financial and a scientific report upon completing their project and must meet their obligations with regard to the documentation of output data.

² The obligation to document output data ends three years after completion of the project.

³ The SNSF is entitled to demand the correction of incorrect and the completion of incomplete reports.

Article 15 Entry into force

These Regulations enter into force on 1 February 2020 and replace the Regulations of 20 March 2019.