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# Spark Regulations

of 1 November 2022

The National Research Council,

based on Articles 3 and 48 of the Regulations on research grants (hereinafter Funding Regulations)<sup>1</sup> issues the following Regulations:

## 1 General provisions

### Article 1 Objectives and principles

<sup>1</sup> The 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 that can be developed and tested without delay and for which preliminary data are not necessarily available (high-risk research). Hence, negative results will also be regarded as knowledge gained.

<sup>2</sup> Funding will focus on the novel and unconventional nature of the research project as well as on the project's scientific quality and potential impact, 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.

<sup>3</sup> Projects conducted for directly commercial purposes will not be funded.

<sup>4</sup> Spark is open to all disciplines.

### Article 2 Applicable law

Spark proposals must be in line with these Regulations. In addition, the other regulations of the SNSF apply, in particular the Funding Regulations<sup>1</sup> and the associated General Implementation Regulations<sup>2</sup>.

### Article 3 Types, amount and duration of grants

<sup>1</sup> The SNSF awards the following types of Spark grants:

- a. "Grant including salary" (project funds and grantee's salary);
- b. "Project grant" (project funds only).

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

<sup>2</sup> [General implementation regulations for the Funding Regulations](#)

<sup>2</sup> The funding awarded with a Spark grant ranges from a minimum of 50,000 to a maximum of 100,000 Swiss francs.

<sup>3</sup> Applications for a supplementary grant for project completion will not be considered.

<sup>4</sup> Spark grants are awarded for a duration of 6 to 12 months.

<sup>5</sup> A Spark grant may last up to 24 months, if justified by scientific reasons. In such cases, the reasons why a longer funding period is needed must be expressly stated in the proposal. The funding awarded under the grant, however, cannot be increased.

## **2 Requirements for application**

### **Article 4 Requirements for applicants**

<sup>1</sup> Natural persons holding a doctorate (PhD or MD-PhD) who are carrying out scientific research in Switzerland or with close links to Switzerland are eligible to submit a proposal. Scientific research is deemed to be conducted in Switzerland or to be closely linked to Switzerland if, for the duration of the Spark project, the applicant is employed in accordance with Swiss law at a higher education research centre or at a non-commercial research institution outside the higher education sector that is domiciled in Switzerland and whose basic financing is predominantly Swiss (hereinafter “host institution”) or has received written assurance of employment in the event of a positive decision on funding. The location at which the research is conducted may be in another country.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> Doctoral students are not eligible unless the applicant has completed at least three years of research work as their main source of income since obtaining their higher education degree and prior to commencing their doctorate and can credibly demonstrate that the project for which they are requesting funding will not impede or delay completion of their doctorate.

<sup>4</sup> A Spark proposal may only be submitted by one applicant, and not by two or more.

<sup>5</sup> Applicants must

- a. have developed the idea for the project themselves; and
- b. be able to conduct the project without any instructions from third parties.

<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> Employment positions of less than 50% (0.5 FTE) are permissible.

### **Article 5 Non-consideration**

<sup>1</sup> The SNSF does not consider proposals from, inter alia, applicants who do not meet all the specified requirements. The SNSF also rules not to consider the proposal 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 proposal 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 proposals that contain anonymisation errors (Article 6 paragraph 4); such errors may not be corrected under any circumstances.

<sup>2</sup> If the examination of the description pursuant to Article 6 paragraph 2 letter c shows that the requirements for conducting the project are clearly not met, the SNSF will not consider the proposal.

<sup>3</sup> Non-consideration decisions are communicated to the applicants in the form of a contestable ruling.

### 3 Proposals and eligible costs

#### Article 6 Submission of proposals

<sup>1</sup> Spark proposals must be submitted electronically in accordance with the SNSF's instructions and must contain all necessary information and documents at the time of submission. The SNSF will regularly announce calls for Spark proposals and publish the relevant submission deadlines on its website.

<sup>2</sup> Spark proposals must be in English and must include the following information and documents in accordance with the respective specifications of the SNSF:

- a. administrative information and budget;
- b. an anonymised project description consisting of a project summary and a project plan;
- c. a brief description of the relevant educational and employment histories;
- d. a confirmation of the employment situation if requesting own salary;
- e. a written confirmation provided by a Swiss research institution concerning its role as host institution for the duration of the proposed Spark project if required pursuant to Article 4 paragraph 1. If own salary is requested, this confirmation must clarify the employment situation;
- f. a self-declaration confirming authorship of the submitted proposal, possession of the skills and qualifications required to conduct the project independently and in accordance with the project description and confirming that the proposed project is not a continuation of existing research.

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

1. project summary (maximum one page);
2. project plan (maximum five pages) consisting of
  - 2.1. state of research in the field including a statement explaining the novel and unconventional nature of the project and a description of the extent to which the proposed research project is distinct from existing research and not a continuation thereof;
  - 2.2. detailed description of goals, methods, approach, expected results and potential risks;
  - 2.3. description of the potential impact of the research project.

<sup>4</sup> The project description must be fully anonymised to ensure that the experts evaluating it cannot identify the applicant, their career stage, their gender, or any current, previous or future position(s) or institution(s). No institution, department, or institute may be named in the project description, irrespective of whether the project is carried out at that institution, department, or institute, or whether a collaboration is planned. When anonymising the project description, particular care must be taken to ensure that references to the applicant's own publications are not indicated as such, as this could compromise anonymity.<sup>3</sup>

#### **Article 7 Eligible costs**

<sup>1</sup> The following costs are covered by a Spark grant:

- a. The applicant's salary. The SNSF sets salaries in line with the norms of the concerned institutions but reserves the right to lower any disproportionately high salaries specified by individual institutions. Salaries may not include any overhead costs;
- 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 material of enduring value<sup>4</sup>, expendable items, field expenses, travel costs or third-party charges, the costs of computing time and data as well as 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.

<sup>2</sup> The costs, including social security contributions, must not exceed 100,000 Swiss francs.

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

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

## **4 Relation to other SNSF grants and restrictions**

#### **Article 8 Proposal submission and proposals**

<sup>1</sup> 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).

<sup>2</sup> Provided they meet the personal requirements pursuant to Article 4, SNSF-funded project staff may submit Spark proposals if they can show that they are able to conduct a Spark project independently and that doing so will not impede their work on the other project on which they are employed.

<sup>3</sup> Proposals that are evaluated under Spark may not be submitted in parallel to any other SNSF funding instrument.

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<sup>3</sup> Amended based on the decision of the Presiding Board of the National Research Council of 6 December 2023, in force with immediate effect.

<sup>4</sup> The provisions governing rights to material of enduring value are set out in Article 45 of the [Funding Regulations](#) and Clause 11.4 of the [General implementation regulations for the Funding Regulations](#).

## **Article 9      Restrictions and blocking periods**

<sup>1</sup> Applicants may only submit one proposal per submission date.

<sup>2</sup> Applicants whose proposal was scientifically evaluated in a former call are barred from submitting a Spark proposal in any of the four subsequent calls if:

- a. their proposal was approved or
- b. their proposal was rejected and was among the weakest third of the proposals of the respective call.<sup>5</sup>

## **5      Assessment criteria and evaluation procedure**

### **Article 10      Assessment criteria**

Spark grants are awarded based on the following criteria:

- a. Novelty / unconventionality of the proposed research project
  - The extent to which the project idea or chosen theoretical/methodological approach is novel and the project is clearly distinct from established ideas or approaches. Indicators of novelty could be a lack of existing or completed projects, literature or other scientific results for the topic in question.
  - The extent to which the project idea or chosen theoretical/methodological approach is unconventional and distinct from established, standardised approaches.
- b. Scientific quality of the project
  - The extent to which the project's research approach, methodology and organisation are sound and convincing.
  - The extent to which the outlined scientific approach is feasible.
  - The extent to which the proposed research methodology is suitable for achieving the goals of the project.
  - The extent to which the proposed timeline and resources are appropriate and justified.
- c. Potential for significant impact
  - The extent to which the project has the potential to bring about transformative change in a central scientific topic and/or pave the way for a new field of research or a new method/technology and/or change attitudes and behaviour within society.
  - The extent to which the potential for significant impact is commensurate with possible project risks.

### **Article 11      Evaluation**

<sup>1</sup> Proposals are evaluated in a double-blind process by members of an international pool of experts.

<sup>2</sup> Each proposal is independently evaluated by two members of the pool, applying the defined assessment criteria (see Article 10). Both experts provide a written assessment.

<sup>3</sup> The evaluation pool does not meet to discuss and compare the proposals.

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<sup>5</sup> Amended based on the decision of the Presiding Board of the National Research Council of 24 January 2023, in force with immediate effect.

<sup>4</sup> Proposals are categorised into different funding priorities, based on the mean value of the evaluation criterion “Novelty / unconventionality of the proposed research project”.

<sup>5</sup> If it is not possible to fund all proposals that have the same funding priority, preference will be given to proposals with a higher score for the “Scientific quality of the project” and “Potential for significant impact” criteria. Lots may be drawn if only some proposals can be funded from a group of proposals that cannot be scientifically further differentiated.

## **Article 12 Decisions**

<sup>1</sup> Funding is decided by the Research Council.

<sup>2</sup> Decisions are communicated to the applicants in the form of a ruling.

<sup>3</sup> Applicants whose address for correspondence is outside Switzerland will be notified of the decision by e-mail with receipt confirmation.

<sup>4</sup> Negative rulings will be justified in summary form. In particular, the applicant will be informed which assessment criteria (Article 10) have not been sufficiently met based on the evaluation (Article 11).

## **6 Grants**

### **Article 13 Spark grants**

<sup>1</sup> Spark grants are awarded and administered based on these Regulations and the other provisions of the SNSF that are applicable to the grant.

<sup>2</sup> Spark projects must commence within six months of the date of the award.

### **Article 14 Reporting**

<sup>1</sup> Holders of Spark grants must submit a financial and a scientific report upon completing their project in accordance with SNSF requirements and must meet their obligations with regard to the documentation of output data.

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

<sup>3</sup> The SNSF is entitled demand the correction of incorrect and the completion of incomplete reports.

## **7 Transitional provisions and entry into force**

### **Article 15 Entry into force, repeal of existing regulations and transitional provisions for the applicants of the pilot phase 2019-2020<sup>6</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> These Regulations enter into force on 1 January 2023 and replace the Regulations of 28 January 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Article 9 paragraph 2 does not apply to proposals submitted during the pilot phase in 2019 and 2020.

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<sup>6</sup> Amended based on the decision of the Presiding Board of the National Research Council of 24 January 2023, in force with immediate effect.