
National Centres of Competence in Research NCCR

Programme Call 2008

Deadlines

Call: July 2008
Pre-Proposals: Submission deadline 15th December 2008
Proposals: Submission deadline 1st September 2009
Start of research: Spring 2010

Contact

Swiss National Science Foundation SNSF
NCCR Programme Office
P.O. Box
3001 Bern
Tel. + 031 308 22 22
Fax + 031 301 30 09
E-mail nccr@snf.ch

Important information

NCCR-pre-proposals and proposals must be submitted via the mySNF portal. Submission of pre-proposals will be possible by the end of August 2008.



SWISS NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION

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1. Summary

The objective of the «National Centres of Competence in Research» (NCCR) Programme is the sustained strengthening of Swiss research in strategically important fields. The programme seeks to promote research projects of the highest quality with a particular emphasis on interdisciplinary approaches, but also on new, innovative approaches within the disciplines. At the same time, the initiative seeks to stimulate a concentration of forces and an improved distribution of work among research institutions in Switzerland, as well as to promote partnerships in the academic and non-academic sectors. In addition, NCCRs are intended to become involved in the fields of the promotion of young researchers, the knowledge and technology transfer and the advancement of women in research.

In principle, each NCCR consists of a Leading House and a network of partners from academic or non-academic institutions. It requires the explicit support of an academic institution that serves as its Home Institution, and is headed by an NCCR Director. In exceptional cases, NCCRs with more than one Home Institution are approved.

This present call is not restricted to a particular topic. Researchers are thus free in their choice of the topics to form the focus of their research. The selection procedure will take place in two stages [pre-proposals, proposals]. The available funding will permit the establishment of approx. five to seven new NCCRs that can commence their activity from spring 2010. A fourth call is already envisaged for 2010/11, presumably of a similar scale.

2. General principles of the instrument

In the Ordinance on the Research Act (Research Ordinance), the object and content of the National Centres of Competence in Research (NCCR) are stipulated as being the following¹:

Article 8b Object and Content

¹ *With the establishment of National Centres of Competence in Research the following goals are being aimed at in particular:*

- a. The maintenance and sustained strengthening of Switzerland's position in strategically important fields of research by promoting research of the highest quality:*
- b. The sustainable renewal and optimising of Swiss research structures by promotion of the distribution of work and co-ordination among the research institutions, as well as their international interlinking:*
- c. The improved co-ordination of promotion measures with respect to basic research, the transfer of knowledge and technology, as well as the training of the rising generation of researchers by means of an appropriately oriented and coherent promotion strategy.*

² *A National Centre of Competence in Research is an institutionally based research project of significance for Switzerland as a whole. It consists of a Leading House*

¹ http://www.admin.ch/ch/d/sr/c420_11.html (German) or
http://www.admin.ch/ch/f/rs/c420_11.html (French)

and a network of partners and partner institutions from the academic or non-academic sectors, is assigned to a clearly designated and thematically delimited field of research and has adequate support with regard to staff and material from the institution in which its Leading House is established.

³ *A National Centre of Competence in Research shall have a maximum duration of twelve years. The following principles shall apply:*

- a. The Swiss National Science Foundation, on the basis of Article 8d Paragraph 2, shall safeguard the financing of a National Centre of Competence in Research for a first stage of up to four years in each case.*
- b. The continuation of the support shall take place on the basis of an application for further financing as well as the result of an interim evaluation.*

⁴ *A Centre of Competence (Leading House) pursuant to Paragraph 2 is the central organisational and academic office for the respective National Centre of Competence in Research. In particular, the Centre of Competence shall be responsible for:*

- a. the superior co-ordination of all research institutions and groups of researchers involved in the National Centre of Competence in Research;*
- b. the academic leadership and overall alignment of the National Centre of Competence in Research;*
- c. the operative control and supervision of the funds of the National Centre of Competence in Research.*

A National Centre of Competence in Research that comprises more than one strong centre, can in exceptional cases, be borne by more than one Home Institution. The prerequisite being that one of the Home Institutions be appointed as contact for the SNSF that also assumes the management of the administration and supplies the NCCR Director. All Home Institutions involved must also afford a significant contribution in financial and structural respects.

3. Requirements made of NCCRs

3.1 Thematic orientation

The call is not subject to thematic specifications. The NCCRs must submit research projects of a long-term nature, the focuses of which are clearly rooted in basic research. They evince a major potential for innovative and internationally competitive research contributions.

3.2 Strengthening of existing structures

An NCCR must be based on already existing and proven points of focus in the respective fields of research and teaching at the Home Institution and the institutions involved in the network. It is expected that, during their period of existence, the NCCRs will contribute toward the further gain in reputation and concentration of efforts at academic institutions [e.g. the creation of new [assistant] professorships, extension or refocusing of institutions, creation of instruments for supporting young researchers etc.).

3.3 Coherent research programme – added scientific value

The NCCRs display an adequate thematic and discipline spectrum with a coordinated coherent research programme mapped out for the first four years. The additional value in comparison to individual project funding must be clearly established. Furthermore, an outline of the research outlook for the following years should be furnished.

3.4 Other aspects

The NCCR must demonstrate which goals it pursues in the sector of knowledge and technology transfer, the advancement of young researchers and women as well as the means by which these goals are to be achieved. A corresponding concept should also be drafted for internal and external communication. The concepts refer to existing instruments at the Home Institutions.

3.5 Evidence of academic attainment/Leadership experience

The main persons responsible in an NCCR (NCCR Director, Deputy NCCR Director, the heads of individual projects) furnish evidence of first-class academic attainment. NCCR Directors are capable of heading and co-ordinating a larger research association coming from different disciplines. They enjoy a high international reputation in their respective field of research. NCCR Directors shortly due to retire must be able to lead an NCCR for at least the first full period [4 years]. In these cases, succession must already be organised or at least in preparation on application.

3.6 Organisation

NCCRs are distinguished by a high degree of academic, organisational and financial autonomy. In order to guarantee smooth operation, NCCR Directors have to stipulate an organisational structure to suit the respective environment and a management procedure that is accepted by all participants. The NCCR Director is assisted by a Deputy Director. The NCCR will deploy specialists to assure support in the sectors of knowledge and technology transfer, education/training and the advancement of women as well as for communication and administration.

3.7 Financial scope

On principle, the financial requirement shall have to be guided by the needs of the respective NCCR. The Swiss National Science Fund assumes an annual SNSF contribution of CHF 3 to 5 million per NCCR. The funding available for this call is sufficient for 5 to 7 new NCCRs. A fourth call is already envisaged for 2010/11, presumably of a similar scale.

4. Requirements made of Home Institutions

Each NCCR pre-proposal and proposal must be accompanied by a letter of support from the Home Institution[s]. The universities are therefore ascribed an important role already at the beginning of the selection procedure. The Home Institutions pledge to support the NCCR throughout the entire period both in terms of personnel and funding and to implement the necessary structural measures. It is expected that, on completion of an NCCR [maximum term 12 years], the changed structures in the relevant research area are established to such an extent that they will afterwards continue to exercise a positive influence on future research and teaching.

Experience from the first two calls has shown that only institutions already benefiting from high international visibility in their field have real chances of success.

5. Formal requirements

5.1 Who may submit

The pre-proposals and proposals for the establishment of a National Centre of Competence in Research are to be submitted by the intended NCCR Directors. The latter shall have to prove that they hold a permanent post at a recognised Home Institution and must devote at least 30% of their working time to the NCCR.

The persons who come into consideration as directors of individual projects are those with a proven track record in research work at a Swiss institution (institute of higher education, university of applied sciences, private research institution).

Pursuant to Article 8b Paragraph 5 of the Research Ordinance the following are recognised as Home Institutions:

- the cantonal universities, the federal technical universities and the 4 research institutions of the ETH Domain
- institutes of higher education recognised by the federal government [university institutions entitled to funding according to the UFG (Federal Act on Aid to Universities)]
- all Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS) pursuant to the UAS acts of the federal government and cantons
- research institutions pursuant to Article 16 Paragraphs 1 and 3, c of the Research Act
- further research institutions insofar as these can afford a significant contribution to achieving the goals of an NCCR.

Pre-proposals should already be accompanied by a letter of support signed by the management of the Home Institution (Rector/Director), (see below for content).

5.2 Completeness, submission deadline

The submissions (pre-proposals, proposals) have to comply with SNSF guidelines and are to be electronically submitted via the mySNSF portal by the stipulated deadline. As the submissions are evaluated by foreign experts, they are to be written in English.

6. Submission procedure

The procedure is organised in two stages (pre-proposals, proposals).

6.1 Submission of pre-proposals

The pre-proposals are to be drafted according to the official cover sheet and the instructions furnished. Pre-proposals are structured as follows (the specified maximum number of pages is to be strictly observed):

1. Summary (1 page)
2. Scientific question and its reference to society (2 pages)
3. General state of research and previous contributions by the project leaders on the subject (3 pages)
4. Research programme for the first four years and expected contribution to the state of research, added value created by the cooperation, outlook for the following years (3 pages)
5. International networking (1 page)
6. Goals and action plans in the field of the advancement of young researchers and women, as well as knowledge and technology transfer (2 pages)
7. Structuring plans of the Home Institution (1 page)
8. Organisation of the NCCR (1 page)
9. Budget for the first 4 years (1 page)
10. Annexes:
 - a. List of the leaders of the individual projects and titles of the projects
 - b. CV (max. 1 page) and list of the publications over the past 10 years of the NCCR Director and also of the Deputy
 - c. CV (max. 1 page) and list of the publications over the past 10 years of the project leaders
 - d. Letter of support from the Home Institution

The letter of support from the Home Institution must provide information on:

- a) the planned measures for granting leave of absence to the NCCR Director to head the NCCR (see chapter "Formal requirements")
- b) the funding of the NCCR
- c) conformity of the NCCR with the strategic planning of the Home Institution

The pre-proposals must be submitted electronically via the mySNF portal (accessible via the website www.snf.ch) by **15th December 2008**.

In view of the subsequent evaluation of the proposal, a pre-proposal can be accompanied by a recommendation/exclusion list with foreign experts.

6.2 Submission of proposals

By comparison with the pre-proposals, proposals are distinguished by their detailed specifications. The content is to be arranged as follows (the specified maximum number of pages is to be strictly observed):

1. Summary
2. Scientific question and its reference to society (*max. 2 pages*)
3. General state of research and previous contributions on the topic by the NCCR participants (*max. 6 pages*)
4. Research plan as a whole, structure of the NCCR for the first four years and expected contribution to the state of research, added scientific value (*max. 8 pages*)
5. Research plans for the individual projects (*max. 6 pages* per project incl. publication references)
6. International networking (*max. 2 pages*)
7. Goals and action plan in the field of knowledge and technology transfer; co-operation partners outside of the NCCR (*max. 4 pages*)
8. Goals and action plans in the field of the advancement of young researchers and women (*max. 4 pages*)
9. Communication (*max. 1 page*)
10. Structural measures (*max. 3 pages*)
11. Organisational structure and procedures (*max. 6 pages*)
12. Detailed budget for the first four years
13. Annexes:
 - a. List of the leaders of the individual projects and project titles
 - b. CV (*max. 1 page*) and list of the publications over the past 10 years of the NCCR Director and also of the Deputy
 - c. CV (*max. 1 page*) and list of the publications over the past 10 years of the project leaders
 - d. Letter of support from the Home Institution /self- funding form

The proposals must be electronically submitted via the mySNF portal (accessible via the website www.snf.ch) by the **1 September 2009**.

7. NCCR selection procedure

The evaluation of the contents of the pre-proposals and proposals is preceded by a formal check by the NCCR Programme Office. Submissions which do not comply with the formal prerequisites will not be admitted to the further selection procedure, and will be rejected if the defect cannot be remedied without further ado. The formal prerequisites shall be regarded as being:

- Compliance with the submission deadline
- Completeness of the supporting documents
- Submission by the responsible NCCR Director
- Letter of support from the Home Institution and self- funding form

7.1 Evaluation of the pre-proposals

The pre-proposal stage has the object of determining the suitability of the submissions for the NCCR instrument and their potential in the fields of science, transfer, education/training and advancement of women.

For this check, the Swiss National Science Fund shall designate an interdisciplinary evaluation committee that shall be composed of some 15 foreign experts as well as members of the National Research Council.

The committee shall meet together and evaluate each pre-proposal in accordance with the criteria set out below. The documents submitted by the applicants and the written reports by two members of the committee for each (pre-) proposal provide a basis for their discussion.

After the individual assessment, the committee shall divide the pre-proposals into the following three categories:

- A) Chances of success: good
- B) Chances of success: doubtful
- C) Chances of success: slight

On the basis of the Federal Council's guidelines on the selection procedure concerning the National Research Programmes and Centres of Competence in Research of 28th June 2000², the following evaluation criteria shall be applied at the pre-proposal stage:

- a. Significance of the research topic for Swiss research
- b. Originality, innovation potential and interdisciplinary nature
- c. Critical mass and added value of the NCCR in comparison with the sum total of the individual projects
- d. Potential of the NCCR to attain a leading international role
- e. Plausibility of the goals/measures with respect to knowledge and technology transfer, advancement of young researchers and women
- f. Academic reputation of the NCCR Director or Deputy, and leadership experience of the management team
- g. Academic reputation of the project leaders
- h. Suitability of the Home Institution

Already at the pre-proposal stage, a first joint meeting shall take place between the Home Institutions (Rectors' Offices), the State Secretariat for Education and Research (SER) and the Swiss National Science Foundation at which structural aspects are to be discussed. The SER shall not make any evaluation of the contents of the pre-proposals.

The SNSF shall inform applicants as well as the Home Institutions in writing about the results of the evaluation of the pre-proposals. The letter shall contain: category classification, overall evaluation, result of the meeting with the Home Institution. No decisions will be issued; all those whose pre-proposals have been admitted for evaluation can submit an NCCR proposal, provided that the Home Institution concerned continues to support the project.

7.2 Evaluation of the proposals by the SNSF

The proposal stage has two goals:

1. More in-depth scientific evaluation of each proposal
2. Selection of the best proposals

² <http://www.sbf.admin.ch/htm/dienstleistung/formulare/nfp/richtlinien-nfp-d.pdf> (German) or <http://www.bbw.admin.ch/html/pages/form/nfp/richtlinien-nfp-f.pdf> (French)

Within the framework of the scientific evaluation, the proposals shall be submitted to internationally composed evaluation committees. Each committee shall be chaired by a member of the National Research Council. The evaluation shall take place in accordance with the criteria set out below. The evaluation committees shall complete their evaluations with a report to be submitted to the SNSF.

The evaluation shall take place on the basis of the Federal Council guidelines already mentioned in accordance with the following criteria:

- a. Scientific quality of the research plan as a whole*
- b. Added value of the NCCR in comparison with the sum total of the individual projects; potential for stimulating interdisciplinarity, new scientific approaches/methods within disciplines, and collaboration in new research fields*
- c. Scientific quality of the individual projects including the potential for stimulating new scientific approaches and methods in individual disciplines*
- d. Quality of the concepts concerning knowledge and technology transfer, advancement of young researchers and women*
- e. Suitability of the Leading House as the organisational and academic management office of the NCCR*
- f. Adequacy of the financing by the SNSF that is being applied for, as well as its own and third-party funds*
- g. Support by the Home Institution*

The fact that NCCRs can get no overhead funding by the SNSF will be taken into consideration while assessing the proposed self-funding.

On the basis of the written reports by the evaluation groups, the SNSF shall then assign the proposals to the two categories "recommended for implementation" and "not recommended for implementation".

The SNSF shall pass on the NCCR proposals recommended for implementation to the SER for evaluation with regard to research and higher education policies. The SNSF shall inform those applicants whose proposals have not been recommended for implementation of its negative decision by means of an official notification.

7.3 Evaluation of the proposals by the SER

In accordance with Article 8c Paragraph 2 of the Research Ordinance, the SER is responsible for evaluation with regard to research and higher education policies.

The Federal Department of Home Affairs (DHA) shall conclusively decide on the National Centres of Competence in Research to be established and fix the financial framework for each NCCR.

Pursuant to the aforementioned guidelines of 28th June 2000 subparagraph 72, the following criteria of structural sustainability shall be mainly applied in the examination:

- a) Support for the Leading House in the Home Institution's strategic planning*
- b) Distribution of work and co-ordination in the higher education sector*
- c) Incorporation into the regional and national overall distribution of leading houses in accordance with the goals of the National Centres of Competence in Research programme*
- d) Agreement with the Federal Government's research policy goals*
- e) Embodiment in Switzerland's international scientific co-operation agreements and co-operation endeavours on an institutional level*

8. Start of the NCCRs selected

According to current planning, the approved NCCRs can reckon with a start as from spring 2010. After the DHA's positive decision, the SNSF shall conclude a contract with the parties responsible for an NCCR (Home Institution, NCCR Director, the leaders of the individual projects). In particular, this contract shall contain the NCCR's goals for the first four years of the contract, the contracting parties' rights and obligations and the provisions with respect to the check of progress and application procedure for the second grant period. Requirements by the DHA or the SNSF can be stipulated in the contract. The rules and regulations of the NCCR concerned must be to hand by the time of the signing of the contract. In addition, the provisions of the Research Ordinance, the guidelines of 28th June 2000 as well as the regulations issued by the SNSF, available via the Internet, shall apply for the implementation and control of the NCCRs.