

Regulations on the Spark funding scheme

(Spark Regulations)

of 20 March 2019

The National Research Council,
based on Articles 3 and 48 of the Funding Regulations of 1 January 2016¹,
issues the following Regulations:

1. General provisions

Article 1 Purpose and scope

The aim of the Spark funding scheme is to rapidly fund the testing or development of new scientific ideas. Spark is designed to fund pilot projects, in particular, with the focus lying on promising and highly original ideas that are not reliant on preliminary data or that require only a small amount of such data. Taking risks is welcome (but not an aim in itself) and, consequently, a documented negative outcome is also considered to be a knowledge gain. The focus is on the quality of the project and not on the person. For this reason, proposals are anonymised; nevertheless, the applicants have to show that they are able to conduct and manage the project within the time period funded under the Spark funding scheme. Research conducted for directly commercial purposes will not be funded.

Article 2 Applicable law

Spark grants are governed by these Regulations and the other applicable SNSF regulations; in particular the Funding Regulations^{1,2} apply.

Article 3 Funding period and amount

¹ The minimum duration of a Spark project is 6 months, the maximum 1 year. In exceptional cases and if sufficiently justified based on the project description, the applicants may apply for a maximum project duration of two years; there will be no addition to the budget, however.

² The maximum Spark grant amount is 100,000 Swiss francs, the minimum amount 50,000 Swiss francs.

¹ Regulations of the Swiss National Science Foundation on research grants of 1 January 2016 (Funding Regulations)

² General implementation regulations for the Funding Regulations of 12 December 2015

2. Application requirements and procedure

Article 4 Eligibility criteria for applicants

¹ The Spark funding scheme is open to applicants from all disciplines who intend to conduct a project at a Swiss research institution such as a university, a Federal Institute of Technology, a university of applied sciences, a university of teacher education or any other research institution as defined in Articles 4 and 5 of the Federal Act on the Promotion of Research and Innovation (RIPA)².

² Applicants must have a doctorate (PhD or MD-PhD) or must have completed three years of research work as their main source of income since obtaining their higher education degree. Such research experience will be regarded as equivalent to a doctorate.

³ Two or more applicants are eligible per application if needed to achieve the targets set for the proposed activities. If there is more than one applicant,

- a. each applicant will have to meet the eligibility requirements for the submission of applications
- b. the applicants must designate one person (corresponding applicant) to coordinate and represent all applicants vis-à-vis the SNSF office, which representation shall be legally binding.

⁴ Each applicant must make a substantial contribution to the proposed research and their work must not be directed by instructions from third parties.

⁵ It is not permissible to have more than one ongoing Spark project.

⁶ Applicants (irrespective of their role in a specific project) may only submit one Spark application every 12 months.

⁷ The applicants must

- a. either be employed at an institution providing the necessary infrastructure at least for the duration of the project, or
- b. they must have the support of a host institution providing the necessary infrastructure for the duration of the proposed project.

Article 5 Spark grants in relation to other forms of funding

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

² Parallel submissions of the same project are not accepted.

Article 6 Submission of applications

1 Spark proposals must be submitted via the electronic application platform *mySNF* by 17 July 2019, 17:00 Swiss local time.

² 420.1 Federal Act on the Promotion of Research and Innovation (RIPA) of 14 December 2012

- ² The proposal must be in English and must contain the following information and documents:
- a. Administrative information and budget as per the requirements set out on the online submission platform;
 - b. A project description (5 pages plus maximum 1 page summary), provided in the template made available on the online submission platform;
 - c. A short statement explaining why the applicant(s) have the ability to lead the project successfully in view of their qualifications and the available infrastructure.

- ³ The project description (Article 6, paragraph 2 letter b, above) is structured as follows:
- a. Summary (max 1 page);
 - b. Current state of research in the field;
 - c. Detailed project description with goals, methodology, approach and expected outcomes;
 - d. Risks and gains of the research project.

⁴ Furthermore, the project description must be fully anonymised, i.e. the document should be written in such a way that the evaluators cannot guess the identity, the position or the institute of the applicants. Applicants must pay particular attention when referring to their own publications.

- ⁵ In the application, the applicants must provide proof that
- a. they will be employed at an institution providing the necessary infrastructure at least for the duration of the project. If this is the case, the requirements set out in Art. 10 of the Funding Regulations must be met. Employment positions of less than 50% (0.5 FTE) are permissible.
- or
- b. they will have the support of a host institution providing the necessary infrastructure for the duration of the proposed project by submitting a commitment letter from the future host institution.

⁶ Moreover, applicants must certify that they are the main authors of the proposal.

Article 7 Eligible costs

- ¹ The Spark grant may be used to cover the following costs:
- a. The salaries of the applicant(s). The SNSF determines the amount of the salary by agreement with the research institution. The SNSF may set an upper limit for the salary;
 - b. The salaries of scientific and technical staff within the salary ranges and rates set by the SNSF. Doctoral students cannot be employed on a Spark project;
 - c. Material costs that are directly related to the research work, expendable items, field expenses, travel expenses, third-party charges, cost of computing time and data as well as of providing open access to 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 maximum amount of eligible costs must not exceed CHF 100,000, including social benefits, irrespective of the number of applicants.

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 may award global budgets and approve transfers between the individual cost categories during the funding period. The details are set out in separate provisions of the SNSF.

3. Evaluation process, assessment criteria and grants

Article 8 Assessment criteria, scientific evaluation

¹ The relevant criteria for the award of Spark grants are

- a. Originality/novelty of the idea
- b. Scientific quality of the project
- c. Potential impact
- d. Unconventionality

Article 9 Grants

¹ Spark grants are awarded and managed according to the applicable rules of the SNSF, in particular according to the Funding Regulations of the SNSF and its Implementation Regulations.

² The project must start no later than 3 months after the decision date.

Article 10 Non-consideration

¹ Proposals that do not meet the formal requirements laid out in Chapter 2, articles 4, 5 and 6 will not be considered for evaluation unless the shortcomings can be resolved by taking minor corrective measures.

² Based on the capability statement (Article 6 paragraph 2, letter c), the SNSF may exclude applicants who manifestly lack the qualifications needed to realise the project.

³ Applicants whose proposals are not considered are informed accordingly in the form of a ruling signed by the SNSF Administrative Offices.

Article 11 Evaluation process

¹ The proposals are evaluated in a double-blind process by members of an international pool of experts. The experts only evaluate the submitted project plan without knowing the identity of the applicant(s).

² Each proposal is evaluated by two members of the pool, who give an independent rating. There are four possible grade levels (A, B, C, D).

³ There will be no meeting of the evaluation pool to discuss the proposals.

⁴ The proposals are ranked in categories, according to the two grades they received. Only the proposals rated with at least one “A” are fundable.

⁵ In case there are more qualitatively fundable projects than funds available, the proposals within the same category will be distinguished by the grades they obtained in each subsection of the evaluation form.

Article 12 Decisions

¹ Based on the recommendations transmitted by the SNSF Administrative Offices, the Presiding Board decides to either fund or reject each project in line with the available budget.

² All decisions taken by the Presiding Board are communicated to the corresponding applicants in the form of a ruling signed by the SNSF Administrative Offices.

³ The ruling states, in particular, the main reasons for the decision, the amount of funds allocated to the project and the conditions or requirements to be fulfilled before the project starts or once it is underway.

⁴ As of the submission deadline of the proposals, the evaluation and decision-making process is generally completed within 3 months.

Article 13 Right of appeal

The applicant may appeal against the rulings pursuant to Article 10 paragraph 2 and Article 12 paragraph 2 above before the Swiss Federal Administrative Court.

Article 14 Reporting

¹ At the end of their project, Spark grantees must submit a financial report as well as a scientific report describing the findings of the funded research and stating the scientific output data, as per the requirements set out on the online platform.

² Grantees must also submit output data upon conclusion of the project. The duty to provide output data remains in place after completion of the final report and ends three years after its submission date.

³ If all the requirements are met, the SNSF Administrative Offices will approve the reports and send the grantee a confirmation. If this is not the case, the SNSF Administrative Offices will return the reports to the grantee for revision.

Article 15 Entry into force

These Regulations enter into force on 1 June 2019.