

Skills Development Fellowships (SDF)

2 year allocation of fellowships

Guidance Notes

Please read carefully before completing your application.

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1 Competition Overview

Closing Date: 27th July 2017

Announcement of awards: By the end of 2017

The MRC Skills Development Fellowship (SDF) scheme has for a number of years successfully supported many researchers in priority skills areas, in particular bringing together wider quantitative and biomedical skills. Supporting researchers in this way continues to be a high priority for the MRC, with the ultimate aim of embedding quantitative approaches as a fundamental part of modern biomedical/health related research.

The SDF scheme aims to provide 3-year training fellowships that:

- Support very early career researchers to explore and further develop their skills in a priority area in which they are already active or in which they are seeking training; or
- Support researchers at any career stage who wish to transform their career by developing new skills in a priority area.

The scheme focuses on the following **priority skills** areas: mathematics, statistics, computer science, informatics, health economics and mixed methods research applicable to any biomedical or health related data sources, from molecular to population level. These skills can be applied across the full range of the MRC's remit. Pure qualitative science is not within the remit of this scheme.

Skills Development fellows will be appointed directly by participating host research organisations. The MRC will identify such host institutions, based on their proposed strategy to support fellows across multiple departments, and potentially multiple institutions, to facilitate training in any of the above priority skills areas. This mechanism will provide clearer pathways for researchers from non-biomedical departments to apply their skills to human health challenges and for biomedically-trained individuals to develop specialist quantitative skills. Attracting individuals directly from core quantitative disciplines, such as mathematics and computer science, and providing environments which support and promote enhanced collaboration between disciplines is a strategic priority for the MRC.

Successful SDF host institutions will advertise their fellowship opportunities for priority skills areas training, allowing potential fellows to identify a primary institution that best supports their personal training and research objectives. The host organisations will be responsible for recruiting, appointing and supporting fellows. Integral to this will be a strategy for attracting and developing fellows from various backgrounds (whether biomedical or quantitative) and for tailoring the support and training they provide to the needs of each individual fellow. Fellows will be strongly encouraged to collaborate beyond their primary institution and will be able, as part of their personal fellowship, to spend time overseas should they wish. Participating hosts will promote the core aims of the MRC SDF [scheme](#) as well as the MRC's [vision for fellowship support](#).

Identifying host research organisations

The MRC is now seeking applications from those institutions wishing to host Skills Development fellows. Identification of successful research organisations and confirmation of how many positions each of these will be able to offer will be announced in the autumn of 2017, after which they will begin recruiting fellows.

Individuals seeking MRC SDF support will therefore be able to apply for a fellowship position at a participating SDF host research organisation early in 2018.

2 Number of Awards and Funding Available

SDF hosts could be either single research organisations, or organisations in partnership. Bids in partnership across institutions are strongly encouraged where the partners' complementary strengths will enhance the training environment offered. Each institution may only lead on one bid but may partner on other bids where a strategic case makes clear the distinctive value of this relationship; no bid should be dependent on another bid being successful. Fellows could choose to be primarily based at any of the partner organisations involved in the SDF host. The MRC will initially be able to provide funding for up to 2 three-year fellowships per bid in the first intake year (2018). Bids are expected to submit a case for two intake years (2018 and 2019). Exceptional bids could be allocated 3 fellows per year.

Although not conditional, host institutions applying should consider how institutional funding might enhance their bid and provide greater flexibility, for example by adding resources to their programme and/or assisting transitions between disciplines. Applying organisations should also consider how their programmes could be scaled to accommodate enhanced SDF allocations, should further funding become available in the future.

Successful research organisations will be allocated a number of fellowship positions into which they will be able to recruit new fellows; once identified, fellowships will be awarded directly the MRC to individuals, as personal awards. Once candidates have been identified by the host institution(s), each fellow must submit details to the MRC including information about the fellow themselves, their project, their personal training plan and costs. This will not be assessed but will provide critical information required for monitoring and audit. Previous 3-year SDF costs averaged £290k (cost to MRC). Bids must explain how their overall SDF costs will be commensurate with this average, factoring in that 'dry-lab' activities will generally attract lower costs than 'wet-lab' activities.

3 Eligibility

Whilst any research organisation may submit a bid to host Skills Development fellows, they will be expected to demonstrate a strong track record of training in their chosen priority skills areas at the target career stage. All bids must involve multiple Departments/Schools/Faculties as the success of these awards depends on the coordinated support of multiple disciplines that are often separated by traditional institutional boundaries.

MRC Units and Institutes are eligible to apply as associate partners but cannot lead a bid (see Annex 3).

International partnerships that add value to an institution's bid are welcome. Alternatively, these could be developed later as part of individual fellowship proposals.

4 Assessment criteria

Proposals for MRC SDF hosts will be assessed by a panel in early October 2017. Interviews will not be conducted.

The Assessment Panel will consider the information provided by applicants. MRC Skills Development Fellowship hosts will be assessed competitively against two main criteria:

4.1 Excellence of the SDF training programme and training environment across the institutions involved

- 4.1.1 The rationale for the inclusion of the proposed partners involved in the submission. If no partners are included, the reason for this should be explained.
- 4.1.2 Priority skills training themes and their alignment with the SDF host's strengths. Themes must be related to human health challenges.
- 4.1.3 A strategy for embedding outstanding priority skills training in biomedicine/health related research, and providing clear pathways to move between disciplines.
- 4.1.4 A strategy for providing tailored training opportunities that span different departments, institutions or even overseas locations. This is expected to go well beyond providing access to standard training courses or modules and should draw on world-leading expertise. To illustrate this, research organisations should present at least 2 exemplar training plans for hypothetical fellows from different backgrounds (provided as a 2-page annex, 1 page for each training plan – please upload training plans under the letter of support document category).
- 4.1.5 Alignment with MRC's strategy (including the [MRC delivery plan](#) or other specific [MRC research priorities](#)).
- 4.1.6 Provision of support to fellows throughout their fellowship. All fellows must have multiple supervisors who span their areas of interest and are committed to supporting the fellow throughout their fellowship. Fellows should also have access to a local mentor who is not their main supervisor.
- 4.1.7 Quality of research training environment (e.g. staff, infrastructure and facilities).
- 4.1.8 Evidence of excellent research, including related competitively-won Research Council funding and how complementary programmes/activities sponsored by other funders will be utilised to add value to the training environment.

4.2 Quality of management of the training programme, support of fellows, and governance of the SDF host

- 4.2.1 Leadership and management arrangements for the SDF host and research training programme, including organisational structure.
- 4.2.2 Clear commitment to MRC's [vision for fellowship support](#), including an action plan for ensuring how new Skills Development fellows will be supported in line with this vision.
- 4.2.3 Strategy for attracting, identifying and recruiting high-quality fellows with either quantitative or biological science backgrounds, both from within and beyond the host institution, ensuring there is national visibility of opportunities. In particular, how the hosts will attract candidates from non-biomedical subjects (such as mathematics, computer science or economics). Historically the scheme has been also open to clinical applicants; hosts should explain how they will manage recruitment of such individuals should they wish to apply. Prestige and visibility associated with MRC fellow status should feature in the recruitment strategy. Note that the MRC will announce successful host institutions on the MRC website.
- 4.2.4 As with current fellowships, how consideration will be given to individuals wishing to move to an alternative UK institution during their fellowship if there is a strong case.
- 4.2.5 Mechanism for ensuring fellowships will align with the host's strategic priority skills training themes.
- 4.2.6 Policies for ensuring equality and diversity, monitoring and support.

- 4.2.7 Procedures for ensuring that fellows undertake high-quality, hypothesis-driven research projects that are appropriately novel, feasible, and likely to lead to impact.
- 4.2.8 Arrangements for how each fellowship will be appropriately FEC costed within the suggested envelope (see section 2).
- 4.2.9 Arrangements for ensuring how best practice is shared among the hosting partners.
- 4.2.10 Arrangements for monitoring the progress of the programme against the MRC's expectations.

5 Submitting your application

All applications must be submitted through the Research Councils' Joint electronic Submission (Je-S) system (<https://je-s.rcuk.ac.uk/>). The deadline for receipt of proposals is **4pm on the 27th July 2017**. Applications will not be accepted following this deadline.

- On entering Je-S follow the menu selections illustrated in the screen shots at *Annex 1* to create your proposal
- A guide to completing your MRC SDF Competition Je-S application form is provided in *Annex 2*
- A guide to the structure for your MRC SDF Competition case for support is provided in *Annex 3*
- A 1 page letter of support is required from every partner research organisation named on the bid.

6 Contacts

If you have any queries regarding registration with Je-S, please contact the Je-S Help Desk:

- Email: JeSHelp@rcuk.ac.uk
- Telephone: 01793 44 4164
- Staffed Monday to Friday 9am-5pm (excluding Bank Holidays and other holidays)

For all other queries please contact the MRC fellowships team: fellows@headoffice.mrc.ac.uk

ANNEX 1: Guide to create your Je-S Proposal Form

Please note that the call will be available from **XXXXXX**. Supporting documents, such as the Case for Support, can be prepared in advance.

Please login to your Je-S account via <https://je-s.rcuk.ac.uk/JeS2WebLoginSite/Logout.aspx>.

- Select '**Documents**' from the left hand menu list from your Je-S account home page
- Select '**New Document**' from within the Functions/create section of your documents page
- Select Council: **MRC**
- Select Document Type: **Fellowship Proposal**
- Select Scheme: **Skills Development Fellowships**
- Select Call/Type/Mode (optional): **SDF 2017 (Research Organisation Submissions Only)** (Please note that the call will be available from **24th March 2017**)
- Select '**Create Document**' option

Je-S Add New Document

To find the council, document type and scheme combination for a particular call please use the call search.

Call Search (opens in a new window)

Select Council:
MRC ▼

Select Document Type:
Fellowship Proposal ▼

Select Scheme:
Skills Development Fellowships ▼

Select Call/Type/Mode (optional):
SDF 2017 (Research Organisation Submissions Only) ▼

Copy existing document?

Create Document Cancel

ANNEX 2: Guide to Completing MRC SDF Je-S Application Form

The administrative lead Research Organisation, named first in the Case for Support, should complete and submit the application through Je-S.

Application Form Tab	Guidance
Project Details	<p>Organisation (Select Organisation option to search Je-S database): Please identify the administrative lead Research Organisation (RO) named first in the case for support (see Annex 3). This RO will be the administrative lead of a successful SDF bid.</p> <p>Department (Select Department option to search Je-S database): Please provide the details of the “Lead Department” for the application. <i>A single “Lead Department” must be identified within the Je-S application form. This is for administration purposes only and does not affect the submission of a collaborative multi-department proposal – participating departments should be indicated in the Case for Support.</i></p> <p>Your Reference: The reference is intended to be a unique identifier for the proposal and is unrelated to the reference that the organisation would be asked to provide if a grant were awarded. If an organisation does not have a system for referencing grant proposals, users should create their own short reference (reference cannot exceed a maximum length of 20 characters).</p> <p>Project Title: Title cannot exceed a maximum length of 150 characters. Example: Skills Development Fellowships University of ??????? 2017.</p> <p>Proposal Call (or Mode): SDF 2017 (Research Organisation Submissions Only).</p> <p>Start Date: Indicate earliest start date for Fellowships e.g. 01/01/2018</p>
Contact details	<p>Academic Contact Details</p> <p>Please name the primary academic lead for the MRC SDF host (this should be the same individual as identified in the Case for Support, Section 1.3, and should be based at the lead RO)</p>
Attachments	<p>Please attach:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a single case for support (up to 8 pages, see Annex 3) • a 1 page letter of support from every partner named in the case for support • 2 exemplar training plans (1 page per each training plan, to be uploaded using the Letter of Support document category) <p>Optional:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proposal Cover Letter: If required, a covering letter may be included as part of an application. It should be no more than 2 x A4 pages using 11 point Arial. The Covering letter can be used to cover details such as Conflicts of Interest, or names of conflicted experts who should not be used as referees. It must not be used to cover anything which should be included in the Case for Support or other required attachments.

ANNEX 3: Guide to Preparing your MRC SDF Case for Support

In addition to completing the information required within the electronic Je-S form (see *Annex 2*), your case for support should also be uploaded as part of your application.

Please consider the following requirements when preparing your case for support:

- Your case for support should not be longer than 8 A4 sides (excluding any allowed appendices)
- You must use Arial 11 point typeface
- You must leave margins of minimum 2cms on all edges
- You can upload only one case for support document
- Proposals containing appendices in addition to those requested will be rejected
- Ensure all pages of each document are numbered
- Set out your case under each of the headings specified below

Headings for your case for support include:

1 Applicant Details

1.1 Lead Research Organisation

- Please state the lead RO, including participating departments in brackets after the RO name (this RO should submit the bid through Je-S). This RO may only lead one bid.

1.2 Partner Research Organisation(s)

- Please list one partner RO per line, listing participating departments in brackets after the RO name.

1.3 Associate Partner Research Organisation(s)

- Associate Partners (such as MRC Units and Institutes) are not expected to lead any bids, but will need to demonstrate clear additional benefit and an ability to strengthen the training environment provided by the SDF host. Fellows could choose to be primarily based at an associate partner organisation.

1.4 Academic SDF Host lead (Name, Position, Organisation)

- Please name the primary academic lead for MRC fellowships across the SDF host, including the name, position and contact details of this individual. This individual should possess the necessary expertise and experience to coordinate such a multi-faceted and flexible programme

1.5 Administrative SDF Host lead (Name, Position, Organisation)

- Please name the primary contact for administration of MRC fellowships across the SDF host, including the name, position and contact details. *This person will be MRC's primary contact on matters relating to administration of MRC SDF including Je-S submissions.*

1.6 SDF Host Leadership Team

- Detail the academic leadership team (which should include the academic lead identified in 1.3) who will be overseeing the SDF host, including name, affiliation, position and contact details for each member.

For multi-institutional bids, the leadership team should include an academic lead per institution. Academic leads within each partner RO should be accessible to both fellows and the MRC, and have responsibility for maintaining oversight across all MRC SDF fellowships based at the RO.

2 Excellence of research training strategy and environment (see criteria, section 4.1)

2.1 Research Training Strategy

- Provide details of the research training strategy for your SDF

2.2 Training Environment

- Outline specific benefits of the training environment

Please include the specific advanced research skills, methodologies and technologies accessible to fellows and highlight how these address the SDF scheme aims. Highlight specific infrastructure that enables the SDF to provide in depth specialist training.

2.3 Unique Selling Points and success

- Any other “unique selling points” (maximum three) that are likely to distinguish your training strategy from that of other bids.
- What successful outcomes do you expect in approximately three years’ time, particularly in terms of the SDF’s skills priority training themes.

2.4 Financial Contribution

- SDF host financial commitments and investments during the award (not compulsory).

3 Management & Governance (see criteria, section 4.2)

3.1 SDF Programme Governance Arrangements

- Describe the programme’s governance arrangements, including mechanisms for identifying, recruiting, and supporting fellows in line with SDF scheme aims and MRC’s vision for fellowship support. Please also include how this will align to the chosen training themes and strategy.

3.2 Selection of Supervisors and Projects

- Describe how the SDF leadership team will engage with potential supervisors from across the organisations involved and allow those supervisors to co-develop projects with the fellows.

3.3 Fellowship Costs

- Each fellowship will need to be fully FEC costed in accordance with the [Fellowships Handbook](#). Given that the average 3-year SDF award is approximately £290k, explain how the cost of each fellowship will be calculated, depending on different types of project and training programmes. Please provide rough costing for different hypothetical example fellowships.

3.4 Submission of Fellowship Details

- Once selected by the RO, fellows must submit a form to the MRC via the Je-S electronic submission system. This information will not be assessed, but will contain information including the fellow's CV, project summaries, impact statement, career intentions, objectives, data management plan and costs. A case for support will not be necessary. Further guidance on completing the Je-S information for each fellow will be issued at a later date. However SDF hosts should briefly explain how they will manage this process in their bid.