

FAQs for the Doctoral Focal Awards call

General FAQs

The remit of the data intensive sciences call appears broad – why is this the case?

After consulting with the community on future Doctoral Focal Awards, STFC has a purposely broad remit and scope for this call to ensure a greater pool of applications and due to the need to continue to support skills and training in data intensive sciences across STFC's remit. Applicants are encouraged within the Vision and Approach to outline how the DFA links to STFC remit.

Can STFC Facilities lead a Doctoral Focal Awards?

STFC facilities cannot host a centre but can support and collaborate as partners where appropriate.

Will the webinar hosts provide answers to questions sent by email?

Yes, where not addressed in the FAQ – please address your questions to our inbox: kegroup@stfc.ac.uk

Do STFC have a minimum cohort number per year of intake?

STFC expects will support 5 notional studentships per intake per year, however Research Organisations are encouraged to consider opportunities to support a greater number of studentships.

What is the expected contribution from host organisations?

Organisations (Project lead and any named Project co-leads) will host students for the majority of their studies and will provide the necessary support throughout their PhD.

Is there a maximum number of studentships that ROs can request?

Please see the answer above. We would encourage applicants to consider the total number of studentships available, in addition to the number of students they are able to support, when requesting studentships.

Can industry lead a Doctoral Focal Award?

Industrial partners cannot apply to host a centre and must partner with an eligible UK research organisation.

How do industrial partners connect with lead academic partners to provide support?

We would encourage any organisations beyond academia who wish to get involved with an application to a DFA to use their contacts to build links or reach out to academics they would like to work with.

Will there be any portals or collaboration areas to help companies interested in providing support for Doctoral Focal Awards?

No. We recommend that you get in touch directly with any ROs or individuals you wish to work with regarding these funding opportunities.

What are you looking for project partners to contribute to studentships?

Involvement from organisations beyond academia in your DFA application may include, but is not limited to:

- work experience or placements for students outside of academia
- training for students, programme staff, or both
- access to facilities, equipment, or both
- financial commitments to partially, or fully, fund additional studentships

- commitment to cover the costs of access to facilities or training that cannot otherwise be provided
- strategic links to an important stakeholder or user

Are international partners allowed in the DFA scheme?

International/multinational companies are eligible to be partner organisations in the call, so long as they have a strong presence in the UK and can be considered as contributing to the UK economic growth.

Are third-sector partners allowed?

Yes, third sector organisations such as charitable organisations can be project partners and do not necessarily have to work in an STFC related area. For example, the NHS. The applicant should outline how the partner will engage and how it links to the wider Vision of the award.

Are UKRI expecting collaboration agreements to be in place with all partners at the point of submission of the DFA application?

We would expect that all prospective partners within an application would discuss their involvement prior to the submission of your full application. This may include if organisations are planning to be part of more than one application, and what their contributions would be, were those applications to be successful.

Ideally, collaboration agreements would be in place at the time that your application is submitted. Please ensure you have prior agreement from all partners included in your application so that, if you are offered funding, they will support your project as indicated in the Project Partners section of your application.

In instances where it is not possible for finalised collaboration agreements to be in place at the time of full application, we would expect a minimum of an MOU to be in place. Finalised collaboration agreements **must** be in place prior to any students commencing their studies.

Are institutional support letters required?

Partnerships must show a clear and joint strategy for delivering their vision and fostering the growth and maturation of collaborations over the funding period. This is assessed through the “Partnerships and governance” assessment criteria, which asks applicants to consider how their training grant will be governed, and partnerships/relationships supported and managed to maximise benefit and minimise risk. Therefore, we do not require institution support letters.

What is the difference between PL and principal base (host)?

The Project Lead (PL) must host one student per year of intake and will be the training grant award holder if you are successful. Students may be hosted at the project lead, or at any of your named project co-leads. An organisation eligible for UKRI funding must provide the principal base (host) for students who are supported by these funding opportunities.

There appears to be no statement of support required by the Project Lead - is that correct?

This is correct, the assessment criteria are detailed on the funding opportunity webpages and the questions may be viewed on TFS.

For industrial partnerships, do we need to have support letter before applying or do we submit this after applying?

Letters of support are not mandatory for this call, but it is expected that the applicant clearly outlines industrial support and contributions within the application.

Do you expect a support letter from the university? What information should it contain?

We do not require support letters from the university, but we would expect that collaboration agreements be in place at the time of application to ensure that if successful, all partners are able to provide the support needed to deliver a successful training programme.

Is there a limit on how many applications an organisation can submit?

Organisations may submit **one** application per doctoral focal award. Organisations can be a project co-lead (PcL) or project partner on any number of applications. Any organisation submitting an application should have permissions of all parties named in their application prior to submission.

Eligibility Questions

Who is eligible to apply for this funding opportunity?

Eligibility criteria is defined in the funding opportunity call text. Applications to this funding opportunity should be led by a research organisation (RO), such as a university or research institute.

Can the proposals include another academic institution, i.e., the focal award is then shared between two Universities?

Yes, multi-organisation applications are acceptable. The Project Lead (RO) would receive the training grant, were you to be successful, and then may distribute funding to any named Project co-leads (which must also be eligible for UKRI funding) which are hosting students supported by the DFA.

If a Project Lead changes organisation, how does that work with this call?

In the Terms and conditions for training funding – UKRI guidance document, we state that:

"Transfer of Student/Training Grant"

Where Students transfer from one Research Organisation to another, the receiving Research Organisation will be required to accept all the terms and conditions relating to the Studentship as it was offered to the Student, including its start date and duration, registration requirements and submission date. Where there are multiple Students on the Training Grant, the respective Research Organisations will need to arrange any transfer of funding themselves. The Training Grant will remain with the original Research Organisation."

This would mean that the grant would still be held at the original organisation named as the project lead. The project lead organisation could transfer some funding/studentships to a Co-PL, if required. If the individual named as the PL at the lead institution were to move, the TG would still remain at the RO named as the project lead. This is because the TG was awarded to that RO, rather than that individual per se, as we expect these training grants to be governed and delivered by a team, rather than by one individual, even though they are acting as the main point of contact for the TG. In the case where the named PL contact moved to a different RO, the TG would likely have to be transferred to a new individual at the original RO.

Is there a limit in how many partner institutions can be included?

No. Organisations can apply as the project lead on one submitted application per doctoral focal award but can be a project co-lead (PcL) or project partner on any number of applications.

There is no limit to the total number of organisations you may include within your application. However, each member of the application must make meaningful contributions to the delivery of the training grant, as outlined in your application.

Are single or multi-institution bids preferred?

Organisations may apply as a single institution, or as a multi-institution bid where appropriate. Prospective applicants should choose the option which best fits their ability to answer the assessment criteria. All prospective applicants should consider any additional partners which they choose to include, as all partners should bring demonstratable added value to the partnership. Please note that for multi-institutional bids that only **one** TFS application is submitted and that one of the institutions must be designated as the Project lead that submits the application.

Is there any opportunity to increase the cap on International applicants given the difficulty in recruiting?

No, this limit is set by UKRI. Up to 30% of your student cohort supported by these funding opportunities may be classed as international students; this 30% cap can be applied across each year of recruitment, or across the total number of students.

Will institutional match (e.g., additional PhDs) be required on this call?

Institutions can use this funding opportunity to leverage additional investment (either as cash or in-kind support) from multiple stakeholders where appropriate. We also support co-funding to be used from non-research council sources to part-fund additional studentships. However, there is no mandatory requirement for match-funded studentships or cash leverage for this funding opportunity.

How many institutes/training centres are expected be funded?

The exact number will depend on the number of applications received, as well as the quality and remit of those applications. We encourage applicants to consider the maximum number of studentships available per funding opportunity when applying.

Can international students apply to these training programmes?

Yes, students can apply to the ROs which are successful, including international students. The first cohort of students on these training programmes will start in October 2026.

Are placements compulsory?

Yes, all students must undertake a placement of 6 months.

Will cross-institution applications be prioritised? Is industry engagement required?

No, multi-institution applications will not be prioritised.

What is the crucial difference between Landscape and Focal award? Is the latter more focused? If so, how focused?

Doctoral landscape awards will support the UK's overall doctoral capability and capacity needs.

Key features include:

- broad, flexible funding
- overall awards and studentships shaped to fit the needs of the relevant disciplines or sectors
- studentships tailored to meet the needs of the individual project, student, and supervisors or supervisors and project partners

Doctoral focal awards will provide support for areas that require a concentration of studentships in combination with a highly tailored training programme.

Key features include:

- funding for research training in specific, tightly focused themes or challenges
- training programmes still supporting some tailoring of opportunities to individual needs

Please can you further clarify the funding structure, particularly with regards training, management and administrative costs?

Successful applicants will receive funding in the form of notional studentships, with the indicative estimate funding per notional studentship provided as:

Stipend: £20,780

Fees: £5,006

Research Training Support Grant: £1,000

Conference costs: £230

Programme management: TBC

Fieldwork costs: PNPE @ £2,610

*The student stipend and fees are indicative estimates only, based on the 2025 to 2026 UKRI, and excluding London allowance. At the time of award, stipend and fees will be indexed to accommodate rises in the minimum stipend and fees levels over the lifetime of the award.

Can the “Programme management” funding header be used as a contribution towards placements, conferences, and administrative costs.

A contribution towards operational management costs has been included within the indicative funding calculation in recognition of the need to manage the partnership. STFC acknowledges that this does not reflect the full cost of the training programme administrative structures. In line with the requirements in the management section, adequate funds must therefore be committed by you from either flexibility within the training grant, leveraged support, or a combination of sources.

Successful applicants will also receive a portion of the “Flexible fund”, which is permitted to be used for administrative costs. However, training grant funds are not intended to relieve the RO of any part of their normal expenditure.

Is the RTSG the part that is given to labs to cover lab consumables?

The RTSG funding header should be used to support costs associated with the student’s research project, such as on consumables and small equipment. In line with TGC 4.12, Costs charged to the RTSG funding heading must be explicitly identifiable as arising from the conduct of the award and must be verifiable, auditable, and charged on the basis of the cash amount spent.

RTSG is part of each notional studentship and the funding for these studentships is awarded to the RO acting as project lead on the application, which then acts as the training grant award holder if they were to be successful. Studentship funding is not automatically “given” to any particular laboratory or department; these funds are to be used by the RO acting as the training grant award holder to meet the objectives of the doctoral training programme.

Where does the money come from to support students moving around e.g. co-leads, partners, placement locations?

For students on placement, we would strongly encourage the industrial partner to cover these fees. The programme management and fees headers can be used to support students travel for their studies.

What level of match-funding is expected from applicants, and can it be a percentage of the overall budget (e.g., 10%) rather than matching the number of funded students?

Match-funded studentships are welcome, but they are not a mandatory element of these funding opportunities.

Matched studentships are not required but universities often do this for various reasons. Does it impact the success of the bid? If no matched studentships are offered, are they marked down compared to a bid that does? Or any leveraging of cash / in-kind - does this positively impact the outcome of the bids?

Match-funded studentships are not a requirement of this funding opportunity. Therefore, applications won't be penalised by the panel for not having matched funding. However, if something is included in the application (such as matched funding from institution) then it can be assessed by the panel for both its strengths and its weaknesses. The application will be assessed as a whole by the panel in line with the assessment criteria. During the assessment process, we will reiterate to the panel what the requirements of the funding opportunity are, meaning that they will know that this aspect is not a requirement and hence an application which does not include match funding should not be penalised.

What are UKRI's expectations for institutional management and in-kind staff contributions?

UKRI will fund £10,000 per DFA per year for Programme Management. This header can be used as a contribution towards placements, conferences, and administrative costs. A contribution towards operational management costs has been included within this indicative funding calculation in recognition of the need to manage the partnership.

We acknowledge that this does not reflect the full cost of the doctoral training programme administrative structures. In line with the requirements in the management section in the funding finder, adequate funds must therefore be committed by you from either flexibility within the training grant, leveraged support, or a combination of sources.

Can we cost for Project Lead/Co-Lead/administrative time?

If successful, you will receive funding in the form of notional studentships. Please see the "Funding available" section of the relevant funding opportunity for more details on the "Programme management" funding header, which can be used to support administrative costs. Please see above questions.

Given the financial restraints that many UK universities are facing currently, existing admin resource is scarce and already stretched. Is there scope to increase the contribution towards project management by moving funding between the cost headings?

No. RTSG funding can only be used for student training, not admin. Funding will be granted to successful applicants in the form of notional studentships, where the "Programme management" header may be used to cover costs associated with student placements, conferences and/or programme administration.

A contribution towards operational management costs has been included within the indicative funding calculation in recognition of the need to manage the partnership. We acknowledge that this does not reflect the full cost of the training programme administrative structures. In line with the requirements in the management section, adequate funds must therefore be committed by you from either flexibility within the training grant, leveraged support, or a combination of sources.

I have specific questions about my training programme and whether it will be in scope and remit for this call

If your query has not been answered in the call text, by watching the Webinar, or in this FAQ document, please address your question to: kegroup@stfc.ac.uk