Grant FAQ's

Frequently Asked Questions

1. General questions

Q. What are our chances of success?

A. In the 2017 award year we received some 1073 Letters of Intent (LoIs). About 17% of these were considered by a small scientific committee to be inconsistent with HFSP's funding priorities (see below) and were eliminated from the competition. The other LoIs were each scored in detail by 2 members of the Review Committee (by mail) and about a third of the LoIs submitted were then further scored by members of the Selection Committee who reviewed this group during a 3 day meeting in Strasbourg. The Selection Committee invited some 78 teams (c. 7% of the eligible LoIs submitted) to submit a full application. Of these we expect that some 30 projects will be approved for funding, about 39% of the full applications received and about 2.8% of the eligible LoIs.

Q. On what grounds were projects eliminated as inappropriate?

A. The most common reasons for eliminating projects are that:

• they involved teams with very close expertise, all within the traditional life sciences

• they were centred on drug design or screening

• they were clinically orientated, and did not centre on the elucidation of a fundamental biological problem

• they were applied (food sciences, animal husbandry, forestry etc…) or approached only vaguely defined problems in ecology (pollution….).

• they were unfocussed "-omics" projects (transcriptome, proteome etc…), with little grasp of either the technical problems or the difficulty of the analyses involved

• they were clearly the continuation of ongoing collaborations*

• the project had minimal significance for fundamental biological research

• they were at the level of ecosystems or populations (Guidelines 2.2.f)

*including projects with former mentors

Q. And the others?

A. We received very many good to excellent projects that would clearly be financed by other sources. This was particularly the case for those examined in detail by the Selection Committee. However as HFSP's mission is to finance innovative research, many were eliminated as i.) they were essentially the direct extension of ongoing work, often with approaches being used simultaneously in many laboratories worldwide (lack of novelty) or ii.) they brought together conventional combinations of scientists from closely related disciplines (all neurobiologists, all structural biologists, all developmental biologists….) and thus failed to meet the criterion of novel combinations of expertise. iii) they were thinly disguised consortium projects with multiple group leaders associated with each team member resulting in many more than four identified senior scientists. In general only one or two projects with 5 (or most exceptionally 6) senior scientists are invited to submit a full application each year. In the last decade, on average only one such projected is funded each year. See **Grant Awardees** for examples of successful team composition (see also the following on team structure).

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Q. How should we choose the Principal Applicant (team leader) ?

A. The Principal Applicant should be the person who will coordinate and drive the collaboration. In recent cycles, the Review Committee has noted an encouragingly large number of early stage scientists as PAs in Program Grant teams. While in many cases this was justified, in others it appeared to be an attempt to impress reviewers (knowing that HFSP has a policy to support young scientists). Committee members are critical when it is apparent that the nominated PA is not appropriate. Note that up to the submission of a letter of intent, the team can change both the PA and the team members – instructions for doing this are given within the application form.

Q. How should I organize the structure of the research team (- avoid 'add-ons')

A. Reviewers pay particular attention to the proposed interactions between team members and you should build the strongest team possible making the most of the different backgrounds of the team members. If the basic rules for participation are respected (especially those of innovation and internationality), proposals are judged solely on scientific excellence. You should avoid adding a partner because of his/her i. geographical location, ii. scientific discipline, iii prestigious name (or that of his/her institution), unless he/she is really an essential partner. Note that 'add-ons' are easily spotted ('….and partner 4, expert in bio computing, will analyze the results of the other groups…' - no details of the expected methods are given, or the sole justification for a partner is that he/she assures the intercontinental nature of the team). In addition, if an award is made, such partners are often difficult to integrate and may indeed be a source of problems for the PI in running the project (they don't feel involved, the prestigious partner is too busy to participate and leaves everything to a post-doc., etc.). In the case of projects initiated via a local interdisciplinary collaboration, it is essential that the other partners are real contributors and not just providing samples for analysis within an interdisciplinary center.

Q. What does HFSP understand by risk? (NEW)

A. Many applicants do not appreciate what HFSP understands by 'risk'. It is not simply that « It's risky because it may or may not work ». A hand waving « but we hope it will », followed by a few vaguely described experiments, will not convince the reviewers of a full application. What is expected is that according to the team's calculations there is a reasonable chance that it will work. This might involve a discussion of the current limiting parameters of a technique, and the novel methods proposed that might bring improvements. Another project might start from observations from a different system to estimate the frequency of events that will be critical for the project. For data analysis it might mean providing an estimate of the number and nature of data points to be collected and a discussion of the appropriateness of a computational tool to handle such a dataset.

Q. What does HFSP expect from 'intercontinentality'?

A. Different scientific communities have evolved different ways of tackling problems. HFSP expects international interactions, by creating new interfaces, to lead to innovative projects. In the 2016 competition, HFSP supported 7 collaborations with 4 or 3 labs from three continents, 21 with 4 or 3 labs from two continents and 4 with two labs from two continents. Successful projects from all-European or N. American teams are rare (on average 1 per year). Such teams have tended to submit conventional projects, better suited to national or regional funding agencies. This will not necessarily be the case in the more diverse Asia-Pacific area which includes important HFSP member countries. Such collaborations will be assessed on their merits for frontier-style innovation.

Q. What does HFSP mean by "interdisciplinarity" or expect as different "expertise"?

A. For HFSP, interdisciplinarity is normally the collaboration of biologists with scientists from other disciplines such as chemistry, physics, mathematics, computational sciences, nanoscience and engineering. However as many younger investigators have received training in various disciplines, an innovative proposal coming from a team of 'biologists' may be considered appropriate by the review committee if they are combining very different expertise. Note that this is a rapidly evolving concept: a novel combination of disciplines that allowed a significant breakthrough a few years ago will not be scored highly now if the same combination has become routine in the field. Past examples would be structural biology combined with routine functional studies or confocal imaging applied to developmental biology or cell biology. While the skills of non-biologists were essential to design and implement confocal microscopy and the treatment of images, much of this is now widely available (often commercially). The same is true for 'routine' bioinformatics particularly in the fields of neurobiology or immunology where these approaches are now part of the discipline. In these fields it would be expected that the computational component would also involve cutting edge science. In short, the use of 'off the shelf' tools would not be considered by the Review Committee as the mark of a truly innovative project.

Q. And by 'local or national interdisciplinarity'?

A. To count as an interdisciplinary collaboration, this must involve people from with different scientific expertise teaming up for a new project. A laboratory working on Wnt signaling in the frog teaming up with a laboratory from the same country working on Wnt signaling in mouse, fly, cell lines etc. would be considered as a single team member. In order to be considered as a local interdisciplinary collaboration receiving financing as 1.5 team members, scientists working in an 'interdisciplinary center' must propose a new collaboration. While HFSP wants to encourage such research, it will not support ongoing collaborations within such centers. In any event, scientists from other countries must participate in the team (and not just as a source of material - see above).

Q. How does HFSP see the participation of engineers and bioengineers in applications?

A. Many bioengineers participate in LoI teams. However few of these reach the Selection Committee because they propose essentially applied projects. Engineers and bioengineers are encouraged to participate but the project itself must not be an applied project (see above – we have received many applications in recent cycles to develop surgical prostheses), rather their skills should be applied to a problem in fundamental biology. We often receive enquiries from such investigators in 'joint-venture' institutions that do not have 'not-for-profit' status because they receive both public and private funding. If institutional accounting is on a 'project by project' basis and there is no private support for this area of research, HFSP will consider financing such partners.

Q. And computational biologists?

A. We recognize that certain "dry" biologists will not have a conventional laboratory and that even senior scientists may work without a research group. As long as they are in an academic institute, they are eligible as team members. If you have a doubt, please contact the office at grant@hfsp.org explaining the circumstances.

2. Young Investigators

Q. Is there a difference between Young Investigators and Program Grants?

A. In recent years the final scores have been essentially the same for both Young Investigators and Program Grants. As there is no quota, the distribution will differ from year to year depending on the relative quality of the applications in the two categories. In assessing applications for Program Grants reviewers are instructed to bear in mind the age and research experience of the investigators and many successful Program Grant teams include younger investigators.

Q. Do I qualify as a Young Investigator, because...?

A. Every year we have a number of teams where one member is more than ten years from their PhD (or MD) or more than 5 years from starting an independent group at the time of the submission of the Letter of Intent. There are allowances for parental leave, compulsory military service or major medical conditions and these are to be included in the applicant's CV as indicated in the application form. Apart from these recognized exceptions there can be no special bargaining. We apply the same rules to all applicants and will not negotiate on this. Such teams must apply in the Program Grant competition and are just as successful (see above).

Q. You state in the guidelines that applicants must have "an independent laboratory and an established record for independent research". I am just starting my first independent position and have a good publication record from my postdoc period, but have published with my supervisor. Am I eligible to apply for a Young Investigator's Award?

A. Yes. The aim of the Young Investigator's Program is to allow newly established scientists to collaborate in a novel, interdisciplinary project. Your ability to conduct the project will be judged on your track record, but we realize that at that transition stage you may have been publishing mainly with your postdoc supervisor. You should make the positions of each of the team members clear in the application CV, Research Experience.

Q. I do not yet have an independent position am I eligible?

A. HFSP does not have the means to support all the young scientists who would like to start a laboratory. Our aim is to support those that have been selected already by a University, research institution etc. to develop an independent group. However if you are expecting to move to such a position by October, you may apply for the spring deadline. You do not have to complete the move, but will have to provide a formal confirmation that you have accepted the position for the beginning of June from the head of department of the receiving institute. Failing this, the Selection Committee will not consider inviting a full application.

Q. I have a staff position in a department in e.g. Germany, Japan where the general direction of research is determined by the head of the department or research group. Am I eligible to apply for a research grant?

A. To apply for a research grant, you must be able to determine the course of the HFSP-funded project and have freedom to administer the grant award. In cases of doubt, HFSP reserves the right to obtain written confirmation from your head of department of your freedom to conduct the research independently.