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The conditions of and procedure for designation and financing of centres of excellence

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This Regulation is adopted under subsection 2 of § 17¹ of the [Organisation of Research and Development Act](#).

Chapter 1 General Provisions

§ 1. Scope of application

This Regulation provides for the conditions of and procedure for designation and financing of centres of excellence.

§ 2. Definitions

For the purposes of this Regulation, definitions have the following meanings:

1) The development needs of 'Estonia 2035' are nine development needs identified in the analysis of global trends and the situation in Estonia (population; health and life expectancy; society and opportunities; learning opportunities; business environment; biodiversity and environment; cultural space and the living environment; security and safety; governance) within the framework of which important steps must be taken in Estonia to improve the current situation or to take advantage of available opportunities;

2) 'Estonian Research and Development, Innovation and Entrepreneurship Strategy 2021–2035' focus areas mean priority areas of research and development, innovation and entrepreneurship approved under the development strategy that have significant potential to address economic and societal challenges; there are five focus areas in the development strategy: digital solutions across all areas of life; health technologies and services; valorisation of local resources; smart and sustainable energy solutions; viable Estonian society, language and cultural space;

3) a centre of excellence is a union of multiple high-level research groups, which aims at raising the level and effectiveness of research through cooperation and joint activities; according to the Organisation of Research and Development Act, the centres of excellence are designated for seven years;

4) the grant of a centre of excellence is a financing measure to support both national and international co-operation of three or more high-level research groups of at least two positively evaluated research and development institutions, allocated to the generation and dissemination of international excellent and breakthrough research results in areas of relevance to Estonia;

5) research and development is novel, creative, uncertain, systematic and transferable and/or reproducible research and development that aims to acquire new knowledge and find new applications for knowledge and is divided into basic research, applied research and experimental development;

6) basic research is theoretical or experimental research undertaken to acquire new knowledge of the underlying foundation of phenomena and observable facts without the aim to put the knowledge gained into practice;

7) applied research means research undertaken to acquire new knowledge with a direct aim of putting the knowledge gained into practice;

8) experimental development is a systematic activity based on knowledge and practical experience gained from basic and applied research and resulting in the creation of new products, services or processes or the improvement of existing products, services or processes;

9) high-risk, high-reward research and development is experimental or theoretical research

which, by virtue of its novelty, uniqueness or interdisciplinarity, is at high risk of failure, but, upon success, creates new knowledge that is groundbreaking, distinguishing prominently from previous knowledge and practices or having a potential scope of application in many different scientific fields;

10) breakthrough research result – a groundbreaking new knowledge resulting from high-risk, high-reward research and development which has a significant impact on the existing knowledge and/or practices of one or more fields;

11) research and development staff means persons who work in an institution as an academic employee, research and development specialist or engineer, and the head of a research and development institution and its structural unit who organises the planning and implementation of research and development;

12) research group is a group of research and development staff working at a positively evaluated research and development institution, consisting of the principal investigator, principal executives and executives of the research group and is engaged in the execution of at least one ongoing research and development project;

13) principal investigator is a member of research and development staff with a doctorate or a corresponding qualification and having internationally high level experience in conducting research and development, and who at the time of application has a valid employment contract with a positively evaluated Estonian research and development institution, work located in Estonia, and who is the responsible executive of at least one ongoing research and development project;

14) principal executive is a person performing research and development with a doctorate or a corresponding qualification, who, during the implementation of the activities of the centre of excellence, works in a positively evaluated research and development institution in Estonia and belongs to the research group of the centre of excellence;

15) research and development project is a research and development project which is in progress at the year of application and entered in the Estonian Research Information System, the purpose of which is to create new knowledge and the period of which is at least two years and the total funding of which is at least 210,000 euros;

16) research infrastructure means facilities – laboratories, apparatus, equipment, scientific collections, archives, structured information or a complex thereof – and the conditions, know-how, human resources, methods, materials, activities and services associated with these facilities used for the creation, transfer, exchange and/or storage of new knowledge;

17) research infrastructures of national importance are research infrastructures whose importance for the Estonian research system, society and entrepreneurship is significant and whose scale and reach is large enough that in order to achieve the widest possible impact it is reasonable and more efficient to centrally plan, prioritise and provide additional public funding for such infrastructures; the list of research infrastructures of national importance is confirmed by the Estonian Research Infrastructure Roadmap;

18) a joint publication is a peer-reviewed scientific publication the authors of which are members of research and development staff from at least two different institutions; for the purposes of this Regulation, joint publications means joint publications between institutions belonging to the centre of excellence, joint publications with Estonian private or public sector bodies and joint publications with foreign institutions;

19) the principal investigator of the centre of excellence is the principal investigator of a research group belonging to the centre of excellence whose task is to manage the research and development activities of the centre of excellence and to coordinate the cooperation of research groups belonging to the centre of excellence;

20) the scientific advisory board of the centre of excellence is an advisory body composed of experts from outside the centre of excellence or internationally recognised research and development staff and experts from abroad, the task of which is to make recommendations on the lines of action and activities of the centre of excellence; at least half of the scientific advisory board of the centre of excellence are foreign research and development staff members or experts.

§ 3. Objective and outcome of the grant

(1) The objective of the grant of the centres of excellence is to develop co-operation and joint activities of prominently high-level Estonian research groups in solving high-risk, high-reward research tasks based on the development needs of Estonia.

(2) As a result of the grant:

1) outstandingly high-level research groups of positively evaluated research and development institutions co-operate in a meaningful way to increase the level, effectiveness and impact of research and development;

2) breakthrough research results that meet the needs of Estonian society and economy are created in Estonia, and the sustainability and generational continuity of the respective research areas is ensured;

3) the international competitiveness of research groups in positively evaluated research and development institutions has increased, research groups are successful in applying for international competitive grants and participate as leaders or partners in international cooperation;

4) knowledge and skills acquired as a result of the activities of the centre of excellence are integrated into higher education activities;

5) target groups and the general public are aware of the activities of the centres of excellence and the main results of research and development; centres of excellence are flagships of Estonian research, known both within Estonia and internationally.

Chapter 2

The supported activities, the rate and period of the grant

§ 4. Supported activities

(1) Funding is granted to the following activities related to centres of excellence which contribute to the achievement of the objective specified in subsection 1 of § 3 and the results specified in subsection 2 of § 3 of this Regulation:

1) carrying out basic research, applied research and experimental development;

2) acquisition and maintenance of apparatus, equipment and software necessary for research and development or modernisation and maintenance of existing equipment and apparatus in accordance with subsection 2 of § 5 of this Regulation;

3) the use of research infrastructure, including research infrastructure located abroad;

4) mobility and increasing the competency of research and development staff;

5) national and international cooperation and networking in the field of research and development;

6) presenting and disseminating research results and promoting the activities of centres of excellence and, where appropriate, developing knowledge transfer;

7) management and administration of the centres of excellence.

(2) The activities specified in clauses 1, 5 and 6 of subsection 1 of this section are mandatory for the beneficiary, with regard to other activities specified in subsection 1 of this section, the beneficiary has the right to decide whether the activities are carried out but the activities of the centre of excellence must contribute to the achievement of the objectives provided for in subsection 1 of § 3 of this Regulation and to the achievement of all the results specified in subsection 2 of § 3 of this Regulation.

§ 5. The rate and period of the grant

(1) The maximum grant amount is seven million euros per application.

(2) Up to 20% of the grant of the centre of excellence may be used for the acquisition, modernisation or maintenance of the apparatus, equipment and software specified in clause 2 of subsection 1 of § 4 of this Regulation.

(3) Up to 25% of the grant of the centre of excellence can be used to cover overheads.

(4) The period of the grant is seven years from the designation of the centres of excellence.

Chapter 3

Requirements for the applicant, the partner and the application

§ 6. Requirements for the applicant and the partners

(1) The applicant is a positively evaluated state or public research and development institution whose research group(s) the grant is applied for.

(2) The applicant must involve as a partner in the centre of excellence at least one other state or public research and development institution, the research group(s) of which participate in the achievement of the objectives and activities set out in the application.

(3) The applicant can involve as a partner in the centre of excellence a positively evaluated private research and development institution, the research group(s) of which participate in the achievement of the objectives and activities set out in the application.

(4) The applicant can involve other public institutions and their research and development staff or experts in the centre of excellence; institutions that are not positively evaluated can participate in the activity as partners, but the budget cannot cover their participation costs.

(5) The applicant must include in the application at least three research groups from positively evaluated research and development institutions.

(6) The research groups included in the application must have an ongoing research and development project in the year of the call for applications of the centres of excellence and the following year, or if the research group's research and development project ends in the year of the call for applications, the institution must guarantee funding for the research group for the following year at least in one-third of the volume of the research and development project.

(7) The principal investigator of the centre of excellence and the principal investigator of the research group can participate in only one application for a centre of excellence.

§ 7. Requirements for the application

(1) The application form is developed and established by the Estonian Research Council.

(2) The application is prepared in English, with a summary written in Estonian.

(3) The application must include at least the following information, descriptions and explanations:

1) information on the applicant, the partners and the principal investigator of the centre of excellence, the research teams, including the principal investigators and the principal executives of the research teams together with an explanation of the competencies, roles and responsibilities of the participants;

2) description of the main objectives, research questions and planned activities of the centre of excellence;

3) explanation of how are the activities of the centre of excellence aligned with the fields of activity and strategic goals of the applicant and the partners;

4) explanation of the scientific innovativeness, uniqueness, breakthrough potential and interdisciplinarity of the research and development in the centre of excellence, and the added value of co-operation within the centre of excellence;

5) description of the expected results of the centre of excellence and the target levels for quantitative indicators specified in subsection 4 of § 13 of this Regulation, and an explanation of the importance and potential impact of the centre of excellence on the international competitiveness of Estonian research and development;

6) explanation of the contribution of the centre of excellence to solving the development needs of 'Estonia 2035', including to the development of the focus areas of the 'Estonian Research and Development, Innovation and Entrepreneurship Strategy 2021–2035', taking into account the fundamental principles of 'Estonia 2035';

7) explanation of how the centre of excellence contributes to ensuring the generational continuity of research and development activities and research-based higher education;

8) description of the infrastructure necessary for the achievement of the objectives of the centre of excellence and, if relevant, an explanation of how the research infrastructures of national importance are to be implemented in the activities of the centre of excellence;

9) explanation of how the activities of the centre of excellence are to be carried out in accordance with generally accepted standards of research ethics and good practice in research integrity in the field and how the research and development data are to be managed;

10) explanation of how the activities of the centre of excellence and the research and development results are to be presented and disseminated nationally and internationally;

11) the action plan and the budget of the centre of excellence;

12) an overview of how the cooperation of the research groups of the centre of excellence is organised and ensured during the grant period;

13) an overview of the planned scientific advisory board of the centre of excellence and its role;

14) confirmation letters from the partners participating in the activities of the centre of excellence.

(4) The data submitted in the application concerning the principal investigator of the centre of excellence, the principal investigators and principal executives of the research group, and their research and development to date must be publicly available in the Estonian Research Information System.

Chapter 4

Applying for a grant, evaluating an application, awarding a grant and designating a centre of excellence

§ 8. Applying for a grant

(1) Applying for, evaluating of and awarding the grant is organised by the Estonian Research Council.

(2) The call for applications and its volume is announced by the Estonian Research Council on the proposal of the Ministry of Education and Research.

(3) The call for applications is conducted through the Estonian Research Information System environment.

(4) The Estonian Research Council has the right to request the applicant to submit additional data and documents in connection with the application.

§ 9. Evaluating the applications

(1) The guidelines for evaluating the applications are developed and approved by the Estonian Research Council under the terms and conditions of this Regulation and in advance coordination with the Ministry of Education and Research.

(2) The applications are evaluated based on the following selection criteria:

1) scientific innovativeness, ambitions, and value added, 35% of the aggregate rating.

2) implementation and cooperation, 35% of the aggregate rating.

3) impact on the development of the Estonian research system, society and economy, 30% of the aggregate rating.

(3) The applications are evaluated by the selection criteria specified in clauses 1–3 of subsection 2 of § 9 of this Regulation on the rating scale from 1 (unsatisfactory) to 5 (outstanding). Ratings can be given in 0.5-point increments.

(4) In order to provide expert assessments of applications, the Estonian Research Council establishes an expert panel of internationally recognised foreign experts and an expert panel of national experts in the field.

(5) The applications' aspects of research ethics and data management are evaluated by the ethics and data management expert panel.

(6) To make the selection, the Estonian Research Council will form a selection committee consisting of Estonian policy makers, representatives of representative organisations of researchers and research and development institutions and independent experts, and the members of the selection committee will be coordinated by the Estonian Research Council with the Ministry of Education and Research.

(7) When making the selection, the selection committee will take into account that the centres of excellence receiving funding would cover as broadly as possible the development needs of 'Estonia 2035', including the focus areas of the 'Estonian Research and Development, Innovation and Entrepreneurship Strategy 2021–2035'.

(8) The selection committee makes a proposal to the minister in charge of the policy sector to:

1) grant the application as requested;

2) grant the application as requested subject to additional conditions;

3) grant the application at a reduced volume subject to additional conditions;

4) reject the application.

§ 10. Designating a centre of excellence and awarding a grant

(1) The decision to designate a centre of excellence and to grant an application or to reject an application is made by a directive of the minister in charge of the policy sector.

(2) The grant is awarded on the basis of a grant agreement between the Estonian Research Council and the beneficiary which sets out the reciprocal rights, obligations and responsibility of the parties.

(3) The prerequisite to signing the grant agreement is the existence of a consortium agreement between the applicant and the partners which sets out the obligations of the parties, the activities and the distribution of the budget.

§ 11. Early termination of the grant

On the proposal of the Estonian Research Council, the minister in charge of the policy sector has the right to terminate the grant early if:

- 1) the beneficiary has submitted an application to that effect;
- 2) the beneficiary or the partners do not meet the conditions laid down in this Regulation;
- 3) the principal investigator of the centre of excellence, the principal investigator of the research group or the principal executor participating in the performance of the activities has, in relation to the execution of the project, violated the conditions laid down in the legislation or has intentionally submitted false information, or creative theft or fraud has become evident in the activities;
- 4) the approval of the relevant ethics committee necessary for the performance of the activities has not been submitted to the Estonian Research Agency by the beginning of human studies or animal testing at the latest;
- 5) the beneficiary has not submitted a report on the use of the grant within the specified term or the Estonian Research Council has rejected the report.

Chapter 5

Modification of the activities of the centre of excellence, reporting on the use of the grant

§ 12. Modification of the activities of the centre of excellence

(1) For of a substantial modification of the grant agreement of the centre of excellence, the beneficiary submits a request to the Estonian Research Council together with a justification, approved by the beneficiary and the partners.

(2) A substantial modification of the activities of the centre of excellence is considered to be:

- 1) modifications to the objectives and activities of the centre of excellence that exceed 10% of the total grant budget;
- 2) changes in the composition of a research centre of excellence, including the addition of new partners or research groups or the departure of existing partners or research groups.

(3) The Estonian Research Council assesses the justification of the application, coordinating it with the Ministry of Education and Research if necessary, and makes a decision accordingly:

- 1) grant the request to amend the grant agreement and continue funding the project under the amended conditions;
- 2) refuse the request.

§ 13. Reporting on the use of the grant

(1) The beneficiary submits to the Estonian Research Council the following reports through the Estonian Research Information System:

- 1) annual report;
- 2) interim report;
- 3) final report.

(2) The forms of the reports are developed and established by the Estonian Research Council.

(3) Interim and final reports include at least the following information:

- 1) information about the beneficiary, partners, principal investigator of the centre of excellence, principal investigators and principal executives of the research groups;
- 2) information about the activities and results of the centre of excellence, including a popular scientific brief in Estonian on the results achieved and their importance;
- 3) an overview of the potential scientific, societal and economic impact of the results achieved by the centre of excellence and the contribution to solving the development needs of 'Estonia 2035', including to the development of the focus areas of the 'Estonian Research and Development, Innovation and Entrepreneurship Strategy 2021–2035';
- 4) information about the presentation of the activities and the results of research and development of the centre of excellence;
- 5) a financial report consistent with the accounting data of the applicant and the partners;
- 6) data on compliance with the indicators referred to in subsection 4 of this section;
- 7) the beneficiary's evaluation of the effectiveness of the activities, including its contribution to

ensuring the generational continuity of the field and to higher education;

8) assessment by the scientific advisory board of the centre of excellence on the current development of activities and research areas.

(4) Annual, interim and final reports provide an overview by the beneficiary of the completion of the following quantitative indicators relating to the work carried out at the centre of excellence and to the principal investigator of the centre of excellence, the principal investigators or the principal executives of research groups:

1) number of peer-reviewed publications by category;

2) number of joint publications by category;

3) protected intellectual property, including registered patent applications;

4) number of appearances as a keynote speaker at international conferences;

5) the number of PhDs defended in the research area of the centre of excellence, the number of PhDs supervised by the principal investigators or by the principal executives of the research groups of the centres of excellence;

6) the volume of additional funding obtained.

(5) The annual reports will be evaluated by the Estonian Research Council, and to evaluate the interim and final reports, the Estonian Research Council will form a monitoring committee coordinating the members of the committee in advance with the Ministry of Education and Research.

(6) The monitoring committee makes a reasoned proposal to the Estonian Research Council:

1) to approve the report;

2) send the report back to the centre of excellence for improvement;

3) reject the report.

(7) The Estonian Research Council approves the report, sends the report back to the centre of excellence for improvement or rejects the report.

Kristina Kallas

Minister

Kristi Vinter-Nemvalts

Secretary General