



Whole Systems Networking Fund

Call Guidance

Deadline: 27 April 2022

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Summary

The [UK Energy Research Centre \(UKERC\)](#) carries out world-class, interdisciplinary research into sustainable future energy systems. We are issuing a call for proposals under our [Whole Systems Networking Fund](#), which is designed to improve Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), collaboration and networking in energy research. We have £400,000 to allocate to up to 10 projects through grants that range in value from £10,000-£60,000. The application window is 27 January – 27 April 2022 and proposals will be assessed via a two-stage process. Successful projects will be welcomed into the consortium and benefit from a range of career development opportunities. Projects are expected to finish no later than 31 March 2024. All information, including eligibility, how to apply, assessment criteria, timelines and contact details are outlined below.

Introduction

UKERC carries out world-class, interdisciplinary research into sustainable future energy systems. We take a whole systems approach and examine the challenges and opportunities presented by the transition to a net zero economy.

Our Vision is to be the UK's centre of excellence for creating and applying knowledge to inform the energy transition and build a low-carbon, sustainable future. Our Mission is to enable the UK research community to conduct independent, interdisciplinary research to inform net zero decision making by exploring new questions, methods and agendas and maximising impact through local, national and international engagement.

Created in 2004, we are currently in our fourth funding phase (UKERC Phase 4) and have researchers based at 20 leading institutions throughout the UK. Our research programme encompasses seven themes and four national capabilities that explore all aspects of the energy system. In addition to this, UKERC acts as a focal point for UK energy research by convening, engaging and supporting the community. For more detailed information about UKERC, please visit our website at www.ukerc.ac.uk.

One of the ways we support the community is by promoting Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), building career skills and aiding cohesion. The Whole Systems Networking Fund (WSNF) was created to help us achieve this. It first ran in UKERC Phase 3 (2014-2019) with the aim of increasing EDI in energy research, placing particular emphasis on improving gender balance as women are significantly underrepresented in grant applications for energy projects. We allocated £1.5m of Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) funding to 18 projects that explored a range of topics including fossil fuels, renewables, nuclear, hydrogen and energy storage. By designing appropriate mechanisms to encourage participation from female researchers, we demonstrated it is possible to mainstream gender balance into the energy portfolio as 80% of the funding was allocated to projects led by women. The fund fostered cross-sectoral collaboration, as many projects arose from public, private and third sector partnerships, which resulted in a range of creative, non-traditional outputs. You can read more about projects from the previous round [here](#).

Although gender imbalance persists, there are also many other groups that fall outside the scope of traditional energy research. Therefore, for this round of the WSNF in UKERC Phase 4 (2019-2024), we want to address diversity more broadly by creating opportunities for the inclusion of all characteristics listed in the [Equality Act 2010](#), as well as 'diversity of circumstance'; by this, we mean different career stages, UK nations, geographic locations (e.g. urban, rural, coastal), academic disciplines and types of institution (e.g. non-academic). We want to broaden both the people and institutions we engage with, connect new partners that have not worked together before and amplify fresh voices in the conversation around our future energy system.

From February to July 2021, UKERC HQ undertook three consultative activities (a session at the General Meeting, online survey and virtual workshop) to collect views from the wider community on how best to use this round of the WSNF. One of the most popular suggestions was to allow Early Career Researchers (ECRs) to lead projects. This is something we allowed in the previous round of the WSNF and several previous awardees have testified to the profound impact this has had on their careers, which you can read about [here](#). As we are committed to supporting career progression, we are pleased to announce that we will continue to allow ECRs to lead WSNF projects in Phase 4 (see 'Eligibility' below for more details).

Therefore, the aims of the WSNF in UKERC Phase 4 are to:

- Improve EDI across the energy research space
- Widen participation to share experience across disciplines and the four UK nations
- Undertake collaborative research with non-academic partners to investigate policy-relevant challenges that could be solved through a whole systems approach
- Offer career enhancement opportunities for ECRs

The fund is managed by UKERC's HQ team, primarily by our Engagement Officer [Amber Sawyer](#). However, direction for the fund has been provided by an independent Steering Group composed of 16 members representing a range of disciplines, career paths and career stages within whole systems energy research. They bring expertise from government, academia, industry and the third sector. The Steering Group advises UKERC HQ on priorities for the fund and is responsible for the final selection of successful projects.

Call for Proposals

We have £400,000 of EPSRC funding to allocate to up to 10 projects. This will be done at 80% Full Economic Costs (FEC), meaning UKERC will fund 80% of the total project costs. For example, if a project costs £75,000, UKERC will award a grant of £60,000 and applicants are expected to cover the remaining 20% themselves. Applicants can apply for any award between the value of £10,000-£60,000 (you can use our [FEC calculator](#) here for guidance) and are required to submit a detailed budget in line with [UKRI guidelines](#) to justify why the amount requested is correct.

The call theme is 'advancing EDI in energy research'. This theme can be adhered to in several ways, for example through research topics, project partners, stakeholders involved, beneficiaries or activities conducted.

We are interested in funding creative, non-traditional outputs that include well-developed engagement and networking activities.

Eligibility

You are eligible to apply to the WSNF if you are a UK resident and meet at least one of the following criteria:

- **Are employed at the submitting organisation on a permanent contract.** Given the nature of the call, we are expanding the type of submitting organisation beyond those [usually recognised as eligible](#) for research funding. Therefore, third sector organisations are eligible to apply provided they can accommodate the 80% FEC rule, i.e. they can cover 20% of the project costs themselves; these are the terms and conditions associated with UKERC's grant. Please refer to our [FEC calculator](#) for guidance.
- **Hold a fixed-term contract that extends beyond the duration of the proposed project** and the submitting organisation is prepared to give you all the support normal for a permanent employee.
- **Hold an EPSRC, Royal Society or Royal Academy of Engineering fellowship** aimed at later career stages *or* hold fellowships under other schemes (subject to pre-approval on a case-by-case basis, please contact [UKERC HQ](#)).

As the call theme is advancing EDI in energy research, we particularly encourage proposals from:

- Those who self-identify as members of under-represented groups (including but not limited to women, ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ and disabled researchers)
- Early Career Researchers (ECRs)
- Researchers from devolved UK nations (Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales)
- Researchers from diverse academic disciplines, particularly those outside traditional energy research (e.g. social sciences)
- Researchers from a broad range of institutions (e.g. private and third sector entities)

There is no standard definition of ECR used throughout the academic community. The one we are using for this call (below) was developed by UKERC's ECR Committee.

An ECR is an individual employed to conduct research activities on a fixed-term contract.

We recognise all career paths are different. Therefore, we welcome applicants who have completed PhDs as well as those who have chosen not to pursue doctoral studies; either group can find employment to conduct research on a fixed-term contract. We recognise that career breaks for parental leave, sick leave and other exceptional circumstances affect the timeline of research careers, and therefore we do not impose time-bound criteria on ECRs.

It is possible that allowing ECRs to lead projects will create problems during contracting as each organisation has their own rules around who can hold grants; we will provide as much support to aspiring project leads as we can.

Please note the following rules. Failure to meet them will result in an unsuccessful proposal.

- **Applicants are only allowed to be involved with one proposal.** We want to encourage people new to the field to apply. These people are likely to have fewer connections and will therefore find it harder to apply for multiple projects at once; limiting applications per person gives everyone a fair chance.
- **The Project Lead and Co-Lead must be from different disciplines.** The WSNF is designed to increase networking and collaboration in energy research. Applicants must develop connections outside their own discipline.
- **The project must be completed by 31 March 2024.** Our current funding phase, UKERC Phase 4, ends on 30 April 2024. All projects, their associated activities and outputs must be completed in advance of that date to allow time for any extensions and administration.

Applicants should contact [Kajsa-Stina Longuere](#) well in advance of the submission deadline if they have any questions concerning their eligibility.

How to Apply

To apply, you must complete three documents. These are:

1. Application form

This is a Word document which contains the following sections:

- Contact information
- Part A, Project Plan
- Part B, EDI and Impact Statement
- Part C, Personal Statement

You can download the application form [here](#).

2. Budget sheet

This is an Excel file. You will notice that there is also a budget section in Part A of the application form. **You must complete both.**

Although it may seem like you're submitting your budget twice, there is a reason for this. The budget section of Part A is less detailed and contains no identifying information. This means it can be reviewed blind during Stage One of the assessment process (outlined fully below). The budget sheet is more detailed and requests the identifying information necessary for UKERC to begin the contracting process.

We are asking for both now so that we do not need to chase successful applicants for it later. They are essentially the same, the budget sheet just has more detail, so you should be able to copy much of it across with minimal effort. Thank you for your understanding.

You can download the budget sheet [here](#).

If you have any questions regarding your budget and how to fill it out, please contact our Operations Manager [Kajsa-Stina Longuere](#) who will be happy to help you.

3. Equality monitoring form

The equality monitoring form will **not** be reviewed and is **the only optional part** of the application process. It is anonymous and will be separated from the other documents. The reason we are collecting this data is to discern whether applicants for the WSNF are more diverse than for other UKERC funds and to assess the effectiveness of our EDI policies.

You can download the equality monitoring form [here](#). Project Leads should encourage each team member to download and complete the form. Do not include any identifying information (e.g. name, contact details).

Project teams can work on applications together but **Project Leads should submit all documents**, i.e. the application form, budget sheet and equality monitoring forms on behalf of all team members. Documents should be saved in the following formats and returned to [Amber](#) via email by **18:00 on 27 April 2022**.

- Application form: Word document with the name 'WSNF-application-[name of Project Lead]'
- Budget sheet: Excel file with the name 'WSNF-budget-[name of Project Lead]'
- Equality monitoring form: PDF(s) with the name(s) 'WSNF-EM-form'

Criteria

Applicants must demonstrate how their project meets the criteria below. They represent the 'gold standard', i.e. **a top-scoring application would meet every bullet point**.

Part A (Project Plan)
Research design and methodology: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The project overview clearly explains the rationale behind the proposed research, its importance and states the project's objectives.• The project objectives are relevant to the call theme (advancing EDI in energy research).• A clear timescale for the project has been outlined.• The methodology is clearly outlined and all techniques/approaches are given justification.• The methodology is suitable for the proposed research and is likely to achieve the anticipated outcomes.
Resource management: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• All necessary resources (including hardware, software and human) have been identified.

- The resources are suitable for the proposed research.
- A method for procurement has been described and is feasible.

Value for money:

- The budget includes an itemised breakdown.
- The total has been calculated correctly.
- The budget is appropriate for the proposed research (e.g. the figures given are realistic).

Outputs:

Anticipated outputs are...

- Specific
- Measurable
- Achievable
- Relevant
- Time-bound

Part B (EDI and Impact Statement)

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI):

- The way in which the proposal advances EDI in energy research is clearly described.

*Note: this could be through project partners, the research question, beneficiaries, stakeholders involved and/or proposed activities. As the first stage of assessment is a blind screening, **please do not include identifying information** related to partners or institutions (e.g. name, address, contact details).*

Collaboration:

- The proposed research is collaborative, i.e. it benefits more than one individual and/or organisation.
- The proposed research is interdisciplinary, i.e. it involves more than one discipline and/or sector.
- Partners and stakeholders have been identified.
- Engagement activities are clearly described.

Impact:

- The expected impact of the proposed research is clearly stated and justification provided.
- A link between impact and the anticipated outputs has been made.
- A method for measuring impact has been outlined.
- The method for measuring impact is appropriate and feasible.
- A clear timescale for observing impact (immediate, short-, medium- or long-term) has been identified.

Part C (Personal Statement)

Reasons for applying, skills and career enhancement:

- Clear reasons for applying have been stated.
- Reasons for applying fit with the call theme (advancing EDI in energy research).
- Skills that will enable the project team to successfully deliver the proposed research are clearly stated.
- Examples of these skills have been provided.
- Justification for how these skills are relevant/will enable the project team to successfully deliver the project has been provided.
- How being awarded will positively impact the career development of project team members has been described.

Assessment Process

Applications will be assessed via a two-stage process by two independent groups, outlined below:

- **Screening Panel:** this is a group of 10 academics, both within and external to UKERC, who have volunteered to be involved with the WSNF because of their desire to improve EDI in energy. As researchers themselves, they are familiar with peer review and will be able to judge the scientific robustness of proposals.
- **Steering Group:** as outlined above, this is a group of 16 individuals that have been carefully selected by UKERC because their experience spans whole systems energy research. Due to their interdisciplinary and intersectoral nature, we are confident they will recognise not only high-quality proposals but the value of creative, non-traditional outputs that seek to 'do things differently'.

You can read about the membership of these two groups [here](#).

Stage One: Blind Screening

As blind assessment is considered best practice in EDI, the first stage is a blind screening that will assess Parts A (Project Plan) and B (EDI and Impact Statement) of the application. All identifying information will be removed, meaning our Screening Panel will only assess the feasibility and quality of the ideas, not who submitted them. We hope this process will support career progression by removing assessor bias and shifting the focus away from years of experience, thereby levelling the playing field for ECRs. Proposals will be scored, ranked and those that pass the threshold will move onto Stage Two.

Stage Two: Non-Blind Assessment

The fund's Steering Group will assess Part C (Personal Statement) and give it a score. Proposals will then be ranked again based on their total scores. The Steering Group will then decide which ten to award.

The scoring guidance for reviewers is below. Each section of the criteria will receive a separate score (e.g. 'research design and methodology' will be given a score etc.), which will then be weighted and added together.

Score	Description
1	Fail: no criteria have been met.
2	Poor: few criteria have been met.

3	Acceptable: most criteria have been met but there are significant weaknesses.
4	Good: all criteria have been met but there are significant weaknesses.
5	Very good: all criteria have been met but there are minor weaknesses.
6	Outstanding: all criteria have been fully met, the proposal provides adequate detail and there are no weaknesses.

Unfortunately, if we receive a large number of submissions, we will not be able to provide feedback to unsuccessful applicants.

Dispersal of Funds

Successful projects will be reimbursed through quarterly invoicing. UKERC's Operations Manager [Kajsa-Stina Longuere](#) will liaise with the Finance and Contracts contacts listed by applicants on their application forms to get the contracting process underway and provide further detail regarding invoicing.

Participation in UKERC

For the duration of their project, awardees will be able to identify themselves as members of UKERC. They will have access to newsletters, meetings and stakeholder networks. They will have regular contact with the UKERC HQ team who will support project planning, implementation and the development of outputs as necessary. For example, UKERC HQ will:

- Welcome them to UKERC, encouraging engagement between the WSNF and the rest of the consortium.
- Suggest ideas, literature or contacts that may benefit Project Leads.
- Assist with operational issues on an ad hoc basis (e.g. personnel, strategy, project management).
- Regularly check in with Project Leads, connecting those working on similar topics as a means of mutual support.
- Request input for the co-development of communications and impact generating activities.
- Provide career development opportunities. The consultation process throughout 2021 highlighted the following as the most useful to ECRs: attending (and possibly presenting) at UKERC events; coaching and career advice from our experienced community of researchers; establishing peer support groups; running workshops around key themes, for example how to write successful funding bids. We intend to run a combination of these activities, though the exact details are TBC.

Additionally, awardees will be encouraged to engage with UKERC activities such as our webinar series, workshops and events like the annual Research Conference.

Awardees will also be required to create a Data Management Plan (DMP), provide regular progress updates to UKERC HQ and produce a final report upon their project's completion. Templates for these documents will be provided.

Timeline

- Opening date: 27 January 2022
- Closing date: 27 April 2022
- Blind review: May 2022
- Non-blind assessment: June 2022
- Successful proposals notified: 1 July 2022
- Funded research commences: September-December 2022

Contact Details

For general enquiries relating to UKERC's WSNF, please contact our Engagement Officer [Amber Sawyer](mailto:amber.sawyer@ucl.ac.uk) via email on amber.sawyer@ucl.ac.uk.

For enquiries specifically relating to eligibility, budgets and contracting, please contact our Operations Manager [Kajsa-Stina Longuere](mailto:k.longuere@ukerc.ac.uk) via email on k.longuere@ukerc.ac.uk.