



GOVERNMENT OF MALTA
PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARIAT
FOR YOUTH, RESEARCH
AND INNOVATION



The Malta Council for
Science & Technology

FUSION Research and Innovation: Research Excellence Programme

Rules for Participation 2024-2030
Rules for State Aid (*Option A*)





Contents

1	Introduction.....	4
2	The Research Excellence Programme.....	4
2.1	<i>Programme Scope and Focus</i>	<i>4</i>
2.2	<i>Contacts</i>	<i>5</i>
3	Definitions.....	6
4	Eligibility Criteria and Applications.....	9
4.1	<i>Eligibility for Participation.....</i>	<i>9</i>
5	Eligibility Under the <i>de minimis</i> State Aid Regime.....	10
6	The Application Process	12
6.1	<i>Application Submission.....</i>	<i>12</i>
6.2	<i>Considerations at Application Stage</i>	<i>15</i>
6.2.1	<i>Respecting Lead Times</i>	<i>15</i>
6.2.2	<i>Assistance with Applications</i>	<i>15</i>
6.3	<i>Deviations</i>	<i>15</i>
7	Confidentiality of Submissions	17
8	Programme Parameters	18
8.1	<i>Project Start Date and Duration.....</i>	<i>18</i>
8.2	<i>Project Grant</i>	<i>18</i>
8.3	<i>Deliverables</i>	<i>18</i>
8.3.1	<i>Mandatory Deliverables</i>	<i>19</i>
8.3.2	<i>Recommended Deliverables</i>	<i>20</i>
9	Eligible Costs	21
9.1	<i>Subcontracted Activities.....</i>	<i>24</i>
9.2	<i>Audits</i>	<i>24</i>
9.3	<i>Eligible Indirect Costs (Overheads) and Other Operating Expenses.....</i>	<i>24</i>
9.4	<i>Ineligible Costs</i>	<i>24</i>
9.5	<i>Collaborators.....</i>	<i>25</i>
9.6	<i>Co-Financing</i>	<i>25</i>
10	Evaluation.....	26
10.1	<i>Quality Proposal Acknowledgement.....</i>	<i>28</i>
11	Post Selection Process	28
11.1	<i>The Grant Agreement.....</i>	<i>28</i>



11.2 *Start Date and End Date*.....29

12 Double Funding.....**29**

13 Funding, Management and Progress Monitoring.....**30**

13.1 *Allocation and Disbursement of Funding*30

13.2 *Final Financial Audit*.....30

13.3 *The Technical and Financial Reports*.....31

13.4 *Accountability*32

14 Dissemination and Externalisation.....**32**

14.1 *Referencing*32

15 Supervening Circumstances.....**33**

15.1 *Default*.....33

16 Interpretation of Rules**33**

Appendix 1: Technology Readiness Levels (TRLs) **34**

1 Introduction

FUSION is a national funding programme that drives and supports local Research and Innovation (R&I), as well as providing the necessary support for researchers and technologists to turn their innovative ideas into a market-ready reality. FUSION is supported through Malta Government funds and is managed by the Malta Council for Science and Technology (MCST) as the Managing Authority.

The main objectives of FUSION are:

- To raise the level and profile of locally funded research
- To ingrain R&I at the heart of the Maltese economy
- To spur knowledge-driven and value-added growth
- To sustain improvements in the quality of life

These can be achieved since research results and innovation have the potential of translating themselves into commercial activities which generate a multiplier effect on the economy, by increasing Malta's competitiveness through the creation of additional high-value and knowledge intensive employment opportunities in Malta's priority industries.

FUSION is a portfolio of various programmes. These programmes have been designed with the aim of offering the necessary mentoring and financial support for researchers and technologists to develop their ideas to the betterment of society.

2 The Research Excellence Programme

2.1 Programme Scope and Focus

The Research Excellence Programme is a national funding programme which supports the early-stage development of innovative projects proposed by public entities, higher education institutes and industry players.

In line with the “National Research and Innovation Strategy 2020”, the **primary aim of the programme is to spur the growth of new knowledge through experimental evidence following scientific hypotheses**. This programme was designed in response to the need and desire for public and private entities in Malta to focus on early conceptual research endeavours. The programme is intended to fund projects which are still in the early stages of research, but which nonetheless boast a high degree of **scientific excellence** as well as national and international relevance. For projects *which may* be commercially applicable, this programme targets research at the initial Technology Readiness Levels (TRL) between TRL 1 and TRL 4



(Refer to Appendix 1 of the Rules of Participation for the definitions of the Technology Readiness Levels).¹

The programme also aims to:

- Form a more comprehensive Maltese R&I system.
- Build capacity in new, multidisciplinary areas in the Maltese R&I sector.
- Fund the initial research in products or services that could have a significant impact on industry, and which could ultimately lead to new avenues for economic growth.
- Generate knowledge and build capacity for future areas and contribute to smart specialisation strategies and policy development.
- Strengthen and contribute to existing collaborations.

The scope of the programme is to provide financial support for research, development and innovation through a bottom-up approach, across a broad range of scientific areas.

2.2 Contacts

For general enquires kindly contact:

Ms Abigail Aquilina
Senior Executive (R&I Programmes)
Email: abigail.aquilina@gov.mt
Tel: +356 2360 2241

The Malta Council for Science & Technology
Villa Bighi,
Dawret Fra Giovanni Bichi,
Kalkara, KKR 1320

For escalated enquiries kindly contact:

Mr Stephen Borg
Senior Executive (R&I Programmes)
Email: stephen.i.borg@gov.mt
Tel: +356 2360 2208

¹ Please note that usage of TRLs are only indicative, as the Research Excellence Programme is not limited to commercially viable technologies.



3 Definitions

Applicant means anyone eligible for participation in a Project in terms of these Rules for Participation and who consequently applies for funding under this Programme. **Beneficiary** refers to the entity that has submitted an application form to participate in this Programme, in accordance with the rules laid out in the Programme's National Rules for Participation, which application was selected for funding.

Council refers to the Malta Council for Science and Technology.

Due Diligence is an investigation of a business or person prior to signing the Grant Agreement.

Eligible direct costs are those costs incurred directly by the national beneficiaries during the duration of the project and used primarily for the purpose of achieving the objectives of the project. All eligible expenses must be incurred between the Start Date and the End Date of the Project and must be limited to the budgeted value.

Eligible undertakings are defined as undertakings planning to carry out research and innovation activities that are eligible to apply for assistance under this scheme. In order to be eligible, applicants must additionally satisfy the following criteria.

They must be either: a) a partnership constituted under the Companies Act, being a partnership *en nom collectif*, or *en commandite*; or b) duly registered as a co-operative society under the Co-Operative Societies Act; or c) a limited liability company; or d) professional body; e) NGOs; f) Non-profit making entities (including Foundations).

End Date means the date when the Project Period, having commenced on the Start Date, expires. The Project Period is the time required to execute the Project as indicated in the grant agreement.

Evaluators are the consultants who responded to MCST's Call for Applications to provide evaluation services for submissions made through this Programme.

Innovation is defined as the internationally novel scientific/technological development of a technological process, product or service. Also, the definition of innovation within the same context can also be applied to non-novel, yet step-change/ground-breaking enhancement of existing technological processes, products or services, or even the application of existing knowledge to new novel applications of these solutions to deliver step-change competitiveness through such an application.

Intellectual Property (IP) means statutory and other proprietary rights and includes patents, trademarks, designs, and confidential information/trade secrets, copyright. **Legal Entity** means any entity created within the European Union, having an operating base in Malta and which



has legal personality, which may, acting under its own name, exercise rights and be subject to obligations.

NGO means any Voluntary or Non-Governmental Organisation set up in accordance with The Voluntary Organisations Act (Cap. 492 of the Laws of Malta). Provided that a registered NGO, or a Professional Body are as defined in this Section, then they are also considered as forming part of this definition.

‘Non-profit making’ is an entity where (a) the statute of the entity contains an express exclusion of the purpose to make profits; and (b) there is express provision in the statute defining the purposes of the entity which do not include the promotion of private interests, other than a private interest which is a social purpose; and (c) no part of the income, capital or property is available directly or indirectly to any promoter, founder, member, administrator, donor or any other private interest. Provided that if a promoter, founder, member, administrator or donor is another enrolled non-profit making organisation, the limitation in paragraph (c) shall not apply provided the availability of such income, capital or property is subject to conditions which are consistent with the general purposes of the grantor entity: Provided further that an organisation shall continue to be deemed as non-profit making notwithstanding that:(i) it obtains a pecuniary gain from its activities when such gain is not received or credited to its members but is exclusively utilised for its established purposes; (ii) it buys or sells or otherwise deals in goods or services where such activities are exclusively related to its principal purposes; (iii) it is established for the general entertainment, pastime, education or other similar benefit only of its members; or (iv) it is established for the promotion of the social role, ethics, education and values of a trade or profession provided it does not promote the private interests of its members.

Operating base in Malta means if the legal entity a) owns, leases, or has been given the right of use by a third party, adequate premises from where to conduct an eligible economic activity in the region of Malta; and b) employs at least one (1) person that is based in Malta and is liable to pay income tax in Malta.

Personnel costs mean the costs of researchers, technicians and other supporting staff to the extent employed on the relevant project or activity.

Project Contact Point (also known as the Project Coordinator) refers to the individual, appointed to act on behalf of the Lead Beneficiary, who is responsible for representing the Project from proposal submission to project end. They are responsible for communicating to the Council on behalf of the Project and supervising the project workflow with the help of WP leaders. The Project Contact Point/Coordinator shall be responsible to ensure compliance with the obligations in terms of the Grant Agreement, to compile Periodic Reports and Final Reports including their timely submissions and effective execution of the project and to ensure the



submission of all required financial reporting activities according to set timeframes and deliverables.

Professional Body may be an organisation, an association, a chamber, society, institute or a group of professional persons not being enrolled or registered in terms of The Voluntary Organisations Act (Cap. 492 of the Laws of Malta), or not being otherwise recognised in terms of Law, and which is generally recognised and acknowledged by the professional persons it seeks to represent as their representative Body. For the purposes of this Definition, a professional person is one who has undergone a period of study at a university or a recognised institution of higher learning and has obtained the formal qualification entitling such person to practice the respective profession; and who provides a specialised service to the public, based primarily on a fiduciary relationship between herself/himself and the party to whom s/he provides such service on his own personal capacity and responsibility.

Project Grant means the granted funding provided.

Project Value means the entire project budget including any co-financing.

Single undertaking means, for the purposes of this scheme, all enterprises having at least one of the following relationships with each other:

- (a) one enterprise has a majority of the shareholders' or members' voting rights in another enterprise;
- (b) one enterprise has the right to appoint or remove a majority of the members of the administrative, management or supervisory body of another enterprise;
- (c) one enterprise has the right to exercise a dominant influence over another enterprise pursuant to a contract entered into with that enterprise or pursuant to a provision in its memorandum or articles of association;
- (d) one enterprise, which is a shareholder in or member of another enterprise, controls alone, pursuant to an agreement with other shareholders in or members of that enterprise, a majority of shareholders' or members' voting rights in that enterprise.

Start Date means the date which is stated in the grant agreement for the official start of the project.

Subcontracted Activity means any activity related to the project, (including but not limited to consultancy), and which is not carried out directly by a Partner or its employees, but is carried out by any third party (local or foreign) individual, company, partnership or entity, under whatsoever terms and conditions.



4 Eligibility Criteria and Applications

These Rules for Participation are applicable to undertakings **that carry out an economic activity within the meaning of Article 107 TFEU**. This section provides details as to the criteria which must be checked in order to assess the Beneficiary's eligibility to apply and the application's fit within this Programme.

Any **eligible undertaking**, with an operating base in Malta, as defined in Section 3, may apply and will be eligible for funding subject to the terms and conditions laid out in this document and in particular the conditions for eligibility. Applicants who fall within the definition of eligible undertaking, will be required to provide the following documents (to be included with the application form) which will then be considered during the administrative check:

- Management accounts, including detailed profit and loss, as well as balance sheet, for the current year.

If the Applicant is a start-up and the above documents are not available, the Applicant shall provide the financial projections for three (3) years signed by an auditor, including:

- An income statement
- A cash flow statement
- A statement of financial position

Other forms of documentation can be requested depending on the nature of the eligible undertaking.

Applicants, who fall within the definitions of professional bodies and NGOs, will still be required to provide relevant financial documents as well as, including but not limited to, an authenticated constitutional document (e.g. Statute/ Deed) and VO certificates.

All applications should be accompanied by the relevant declarations duly completed within the Appendices of the Application Form.

Given the aims of the Research Excellence Programme, it is integral that any proposal that will be considered for funding implements a scientific basis and highlights the research methodology to be conducted.

4.1 Eligibility for Participation

Any applicants that at the time of proposal submission are considered by MCST to be non-compliant with respect to Grant Agreement obligations on other active projects funded by MCST, may be immediately deemed ineligible at application stage or will not be awarded funding under this programme. This also applies to situations whereby the applicant is outside



approved project timelines on other projects funded by MCST, and where the applicant is in recognised default.

Any application submitted by or including the participation of any legal person or legal entity having, in totality or in majority ownership, the same shareholders, partners or persons holding and/ or exercising a controlling power in any other legal entity which will have been at any time prior to such application declared as non-compliant or defaulting on any other contract or agreement entered into with MCST, shall be automatically declared as inadmissible.

Kindly note that only single entity applicants are eligible and thus there should only be one beneficiary as an Applicant. Furthermore, the applicant entity needs to be established/ incorporated by the date of application submission.

5 Eligibility Under the *de minimis* State Aid Regime

Assistance provided under these National Rules for Participation is in line with the terms and conditions of Commission Regulation (EU) No 2023/2831 of 13 December 2023² on the application of Articles 107 and 108 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union to *de minimis* aid (OJ L, 2023/2831, 15.12.2023)

The *de minimis* Regulation stipulates that **a single undertaking cannot receive more than €300,000 in *de minimis* aid over 3 years**, including *de minimis* aid from schemes offered by entities other than the Council. This period covers the year concerned as well as the previous two years.

Any *de minimis* aid received more than the established threshold will have to be recovered, with interest from the undertaking receiving the aid.

This Regulation applies to aid granted to undertakings in all sectors, with the exception of:

- (a) aid granted to undertakings active in the primary production of fishery and aquaculture products;
- (b) aid granted to undertakings active in the processing and marketing of fishery and aquaculture products, where the amount of the aid is fixed on the basis of price or quantity of products purchased or put on the market;
- (c) aid granted to undertakings active in the primary production of agricultural products;

² More information available here: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2023/2831>

- (d) aid granted to undertakings active in the processing and marketing of agricultural products, in one of the following cases:
- (i) where the amount of the aid is fixed on the basis of the price or quantity of such products purchased from primary producers or put on the market by the undertakings concerned;
 - (ii) where the aid is conditional on being partly or entirely passed on to primary producers;
- (e) aid granted to export-related activities towards third countries or Member States, namely aid directly linked to the quantities exported, the establishment and operation of a distribution network or other current expenditure linked to the export activity;
- (f) aid contingent upon the use of domestic goods and services over imported goods and services.

Where an undertaking is active in the sectors referred to in points (a), (b), (c) or (d) above, or has other activities falling within the scope of the *de minimis* Regulation, the *de minimis* Regulation shall apply to aid granted in respect of the latter sectors or activities, provided that the Council ensures, by relying on appropriate means such as separation of activities or separation of accounts, that the activities in the sectors excluded from the scope of this Regulation do not benefit from the *de minimis* aid granted in accordance with this Regulation.

The rules on cumulation of aid as outlined in Article 5 of the *de minimis* Regulation will be respected. In line with Article 6(1) of the *de minimis* Regulation, as of 1 January 2026, information on *de minimis* aid granted under this scheme shall be made publicly available in the central register at national or Union Level.

MCST shall retain the following records:

- the identification of the beneficiary,
- the aid amount,
- the granting date,
- the aid instrument, and
- the sector involved on the basis of the statistical classification of economic activities in the Union ('NACE classification').



6 The Application Process

The Call for Project Proposals will be open *for six weeks* between **5th February, 2024 to 23:59PM on 18th March, 2024**. **Proposals which are received after the deadline stipulated will be deemed administratively non-compliant.** The selection and funding of proposals under this Programme shall be on a competitive basis. All project application submissions, which must reach MCST by the deadline, must be dated and signed physically or electronically by the applicant's legal representative, regardless of organisational lead times and other administrative obstacles. Applicants are encouraged to apply in good time as additions, amendments or submissions after the deadline will not be considered.

Applicants should refer to the eligibility criteria in Sections 4 and 5.

6.1 Application Submission

The Research Excellence project application must present a coherent, comprehensive and credible plan based on:

- ✓ Reasonable estimates of human resources, finance, deliverables and timeframes; and
- ✓ Templates provided by MCST.

Submission, evaluation and selection of project applications will be in the form of a one-stage process. The applicant must ensure complete compliance with the 'Rules for Participation 2024 - 2030' prior to submission as no amendment or negotiation thereto will be allowed after submission. Any unapproved deviations will result in the failure of the application during the administrative check.

The legal representative of the participating organisation of the applicant must either physically or electronically sign off the application and enter the date of signature. The legal representative of the applying organisation must also sign off all relevant declarations found within the Appendices of the Application Form.

All applications shall be evaluated according to the procedure outlined under Section 10 of these Rules for Participation. The application process is a **single stage** process. This means that once an application has been submitted, modifications thereto will not be allowed. Moreover, requests made by the applicant to allow negotiations on the content of the proposals, after submission will be rejected. In instances where errors in the budget are noted during the evaluation process, these will be categorised by the Council into major deviations (**affecting 10% or over of the grant value**) or minor deviations (**affecting less than 10% of the grant value**) e.g., if the grant value requested is €50,000, any errors in the budget exceeding €5,000,



would be considered as a major deviation. Minor deviations will be amended by the Council and evaluated on that basis. The beneficiary will be given the opportunity to accept or decline proceeding with the project if awarded. On the other hand, major deviations will be considered as administratively non-compliant.

In cases, where deviations from the mandatory deliverables or budgets detailed herein are required, applicants should be guided by section 6.3 below. **The content of the Application Form will be directly appended to the Grant Agreements for successful applicants and will constitute the Grant Agreement technical obligations.**

Any text within the submitted application, which are more than the prescribed maximum word count and/or page limits, shall be **disregarded in the scientific evaluation process.**

Application Forms should be sent electronically to rep.mcst@gov.mt keeping Ms Abigail Aquilina (abigail.aquilina@gov.mt) in copy, with “Research Excellence Programme 2024 Application Submission” as a subject.

Ms Abigail Aquilina
Senior Executive (R&I Programmes)
Email: abigail.aquilina@gov.mt
Tel: +356 2360 2241

For escalated enquiries kindly contact:

Mr Stephen Borg
Senior Executive (R&I Programmes)
Email: stephen.i.borg@gov.mt
Tel: +356 2360 2208

In both cases, it is the responsibility of the applicant to ensure that a confirmation of receipt is provided.

All Submissions must include:

- ✓ The application form in MS Word (.docx) format and a signed scanned copy (to be sent by email)
- ✓ A precise plan of project activities, timeframes, and deliverables, including a visual representation through a Gantt Chart
- ✓ A precise indication of project costs signed and as a separate excel spreadsheet
- ✓ Curricula Vitae of key researchers including relevant track records. These should clearly establish that there is the potential in carrying out the project.
- ✓ Letters of intent or related correspondence to confirm a commitment for external researchers and/or subcontracted entities (where applicable) to collaborate on the Project.
- ✓ A detailed plan of how Beneficiary's knowledge and, where applicable subcontractors or collaborators, will be used to perform the project tasks and to achieve the project objectives (At this stage, if subcontractors have not been identified, one should mention the tasks that will be passed on and the expertise required.)
- ✓ The signed *de minimis* State Aid Declaration Form (Kindly note that an updated State Aid Declaration form is to be submitted upon the signing of the Grant Agreement should the project be selected for funding, as well as declarations on Indirect State Aid).
- ✓ Management Accounts, including detailed profit and loss, as well as balance sheet, for the current year.
- ✓ In the event that the applicant is a start-up, and the above documents are not available, the applicant shall provide the financial projections for three (3) years signed by an independent certified public accountant, including:
 - An income statement,
 - A cash flow statement, and
 - A statement of financial position

The additional documentation to be submitted for this call can be found on the MCST Resource page here: <https://mcst.gov.mt/resource-page/>

It should be noted that large emails may be automatically rejected by the system. The applicant may make use of cloud storage or mass file transfer systems (e.g., WeTransfer). **It is the responsibility of the applicant to ensure that application documents are sent out successfully. All received applications shall be acknowledged by email. Proposals which are received after the deadline stipulated will be deemed administratively non-compliant. Incomplete applications as at the deadline of this call will not be considered.**

6.2 Considerations at Application Stage

6.2.1 Respecting Lead Times

All organisations, including MCST, have their internal procedures for processing, approving and signing off on legally binding documents. Beneficiaries are to ensure that they are aware of these lead times in their organisation as well as in the other organisations which may be involved. It is the applicant's responsibility to ask for information on lead times pertaining to MCST.

Applicants should also consider personal commitments, vacation leave etc, when planning to apply. **All project application submissions must reach MCST by not later than 23:59PM (CET) on 18th March, 2024 on the day of the deadline.**

6.2.2 Assistance with Applications

Prospective Project Applicants are encouraged to seek the advice of MCST in the preparation of the project application. This should help identify any areas of concern prior to the submission of the application and lead to a better quality of submission. Advice shall only be given in respect to these Rules for Participation and not on technical grounds. **Applicants are particularly encouraged to seek the MCST's guidance through proposal-specific one-to-one sessions to ensure that the single-stage application documentation is complete and effective, as once submitted, it cannot be edited.**

6.3 Deviations

Applicants should note that:

- Transfers of project funds between line items **over the duration of the project** that are **cumulatively less than 20% of the grant value are automatically eligible** provided that:
 - i. the limits mentioned in the Rules of Participation in Section 9 are adhered to
 - ii. expenses are exclusively used throughout the project lifetime to the sole benefit of the project
 - iii. requested costs should be eligible as per Rules of Participation
- Should transfers of project funds between line items are **cumulatively greater than 20% of the grant value, these will be considered as significant alterations to the proposal and will not be eligible.**



Kindly note that with respect to transfer of project funds, these should be reflected in the project progress meetings and in the Project Audited Financial Report, mentioned in Section 8.3.1.

Kindly note that the structure of the line items will be as follows:

- Transfers between different budget categories will always contribute to the 20% limit.
- Each **manager** will be considered as its own line item (transfers between managers will contribute to the 20% limit)
- **Research personnel** will be considered a single line item (transfers between research personnel will not contribute to the 20% limit)
- **Equipment** under €5,000 will be considered a single line item (transfers between equipment (under €5,000) will not contribute to the 20% limit). However, each piece of equipment over €5,000 will be considered their own line items (transfers between equipment (over €5,000) will contribute to the 20% limit).
- **Subcontracted activities** of under €5,000 will be considered a single line item (transfers between subcontracting (under €5,000) will not contribute to the 20% limit). However, subcontracting over €5,000 will be considered their own line items (transfers between subcontracting (over €5,000) will contribute to the 20% limit).
- **Consumables** of under €5,000 will be considered a single line item (transfers between consumables (under €5,000) will not contribute to the 20% limit). However, consumables over €5,000 will be considered their own line items (transfers between consumables (over €5,000) will contribute to the 20% limit).
- **Travel** will be considered a single line item (transfers between travel will not contribute to the 20% limit).

Kindly note that the term 'own line item' refers to a whole budget category whereas 'single line item' refers to one individual line item within a budget category.

Should an equipment/ subcontracting originally proposed to be over €5,000, but get reduced to less than €5,000 over the course of the project, this will still be considered as an individual line item. Should an item of equipment/subcontracting originally proposed to be less than €5,000, be increased to over €5,000 over the course of the project, this will alter to an individual line item.



For reference purposes, please find attached the above transfers in a tabular format:

Will contribute to the 20% limit	Will not contribute to the 20% limit
Transfers between different budget categories	
Transfers between managers	Transfers between research personnel
Transfers between items of equipment (over €5,000)	Transfers between items of equipment (under €5,000)
Transfers between subcontracted activities (over €5,000)	Transfers between subcontracted activities (under €5,000)
Transfers between consumables (over €5,000)	Transfers between consumables (under €5,000)
	Transfers between travel activities

7 Confidentiality of Submissions

1. Confidentiality of Submissions

Unless otherwise indicated, all project application submissions except for the name of the entity, project contacts, title of proposal and the abstract shall be treated in strict confidence.

The data collected by the Council via the application for the aid and its subsequent processing by the Council to evaluate the data subject's request for aid under the Scheme is in line with:

1. The National Rules for Participation;
2. Commission Regulation (EU) 2023/2831 of 13 December 2023³ on the application of Articles 107 and 108 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union to *de minimis* aid.
3. Data Protection Act (CAP 586 of the Laws of Malta) and Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data and repealing Directive 95/46/EC (General Data Protection Regulation).
4. The legitimate basis to process personal data submitted by the data subject by virtue of his/her written application for aid is Regulation 6 (1)(b) of the General Data Protection

³ More information available here: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2023/2831>

Regulation (“GDPR”), as ‘processing is necessary in order to take steps at the request of the data subject prior to entering into a contract’.

8 Programme Parameters

MCST reserves the right to carry out financial and/or technical audits at its discretion, at any time during the duration of the project to ensure that Programme Parameters, as per contractual obligations are being observed.

8.1 Project Start Date and Duration

The project must start by at least **1st July, 2024** or as **otherwise stated by the MCST**. The **project must be implemented across an 18-month period**, without the possibility of an extension.

8.2 Project Grant

The maximum possible grant value for a project is **€80,000**.

8.3 Deliverables

Deliverables are tangible outcomes of the project and must be submissible. They are utilized as an assessment of the technical competence of a project plan at application stage and as a commitment of progress during the project duration. They must be proposed between the start date and end date of the project. Deliverables not within the project timelines will not be considered. If the project is awarded, evidence should be submitted for each deliverable mentioned in the application form to ensure that it has been attained successfully.

From 2024, it will be mandatory for Beneficiaries to attend an information session or a one-to-one meeting on the FUSION: Commercialisation Voucher Programme (CVP), in order to gain awareness on the funding programme’s opportunities. For commercially viable projects, it would be beneficial for beneficiaries to discover how to advance their research’s TRL level through progressing through the FUSION funding portfolio pathway.

It is an obligation that:

- **File storing and synchronization service** e.g. Google Drive or Dropbox, is set up and shared with the Council to support the project monitoring process. The shared folder



should reflect the structure of deliverables provided in the application form i.e., every deliverable should have its own sub-folder with evidence saved within.

8.3.1 Mandatory Deliverables

The Beneficiary must:

- ✓ Report on project progress as per the list hereunder and in line with the templates provided:
 - Hold a **project kick-off meeting** (online or in-person) to verbally discuss and clarify project rules, pre-project progress, protocols to implement changes to project plan and administrative updates.
 - Hold a project **progress meeting** to verbally update the MCST **every 6 months**. This includes delivering a **presentation**. (Kindly note, that the contracting authority may, at its own discretion, request additional meetings if required).
 - Submit an end of **Project Technical Report**.
 - Submit an end of **Project Audited Financial Report**.
 - At least one **article in public media** (e.g., local newspapers or magazines) to raise public awareness, **including an acknowledgement to the Council**. A copy should be presented to MCST within two weeks of publication.
 - Attend an information session or a one-to-one meeting on the FUSION: Commercialisation Voucher Programme (CVP)

The Reports must include sufficient evidence on the achievement of the project objectives, as well as the parameters indicated in the application, and they must be provided in accordance with the templates presented to the Project Coordinator by the MCST.

The **Project Technical Report must be submitted prior to the termination of the project** within which it is due.

The **Project Audited Financial Report must be submitted within two months from the completion of the project** to account for lead time and payroll in the lifetime of the project.

Any changes to the project objectives, work-packages or any other parameter committed to in the application, are to be communicated in writing with clear justification to the MCST prior to the deadline. The written request will be referred to the Unit Director for approval. The MCST will acknowledge receipt and endeavour to reply in a timely manner so that the momentum of the project remains unaffected.

Acceptance or otherwise of any changes shall be at the sole discretion of the MCST and its decision shall be binding, final and irrevocable. Any other communication shall not be considered valid or binding.

8.3.2 Recommended Deliverables

Further to the mandatory deliverables, MCST recommends that applicants submit no more than 8 further deliverables (not more than 8). Although the deliverables cited below are not mandatory, if the applicant includes such recommended deliverables at the proposal stage, this enhances the strength of the proposal at application stage. The recommended deliverables may include:

- ✓ A plan to assess the research after its conclusion and further research
- ✓ The attainment of any certification or degrees
- ✓ A strategic plan to exploit or further develop the results of the research
- ✓ Generation of new knowledge (Reports after the conclusion of testing)
- ✓ Collaborations between the Beneficiary and centres of high repute
- ✓ Industrial and Intellectual Property generation
- ✓ Dissemination activities, including but not limited to, social media posts, local newspapers, conferences, publications, project exhibitions etc. (preferably open access)

Activities related to project set-up should not be considered as deliverables. These include:

- ✓ Personnel recruitment
- ✓ Procurement of equipment
- ✓ Internal Meetings

Kindly note that the lists of examples given above is not exhaustive.

In the case of deliverables that will be submitted periodically (e.g., monthly reports on progress, reports on IP status etc.), only the final version that will be submitted will be considered as the deliverable.

In the case of publications, these should take place during the duration of the project, and where available and possible, deposited in the entity's repository, including an acknowledgement to the Council. In cases where open access-fees were budgeted for, it is the responsibility of the beneficiary to account for the time it would take for the invoicing and payment of that fee.

Provided further that if the Beneficiary claims that such an attempt to publish this research paper will have been unsuccessful, the Beneficiary must prove to the satisfaction of the



Managing Authority and through the submission of sufficient and adequate documentary evidence that such an attempt to publish a research paper in terms of the requirements of this Clause was in fact made. Sufficient and adequate documentary evidence includes evidence that the paper was actually submitted for publication and documentary evidence that the paper was rejected for publication. If the Managing Authority is satisfied with the evidence provided, then the Beneficiary will not be held in breach of this particular obligation.

A copy of all publications must be presented to MCST before any retention is disbursed.

The format of deliverables to be submitted must be included in the application. Deliverables may take the form of presentations, reports, correspondence, legal agreements, images, event agendas, audio recordings, videos, databases, certificates or manuscripts).

The MCST appreciates that the fulfilment of the recommended deliverables may be dependent on external factors. The Beneficiary is expected to take these deliverables into consideration when submitting their application form. **Although these deliverables are non-compulsory, if listed as committed deliverables in the application stage, they must be adhered to.**

9 Eligible Costs

Eligible direct costs are those costs incurred directly by the applicant during the lifetime of the project, and which are primarily used for the purpose of achieving the objectives of the project. All eligible expenses must be incurred between the Start Date and the End Date of the Project and must be limited to the budgeted value.

Start Date means the date which is stated in the grant agreement.

End Date means the date when the Project period, having commenced on the Start Date, expires.

Project period is the period allocated for the execution of the Project, and as indicated by the applicant. For the purposes of the Research Excellence Programme, this period is of **eighteen** months.

Project Value is the project grant in its entirety including any co-financing (10% for Option A)

Project Grant or **Project Budget** is the granted funding provided.

The **Eligible Direct Costs** are:

- Personnel Costs

There are no limitations posed with regards to the number of employees involved in a single project. Furthermore, both new and existing personnel shall be eligible for funding. Management costs are limited to **15% of the project value**. Any project management which is not carried out by the applicant shall be deemed as subcontracting.

The hourly rate (z) is calculated using the following formula:

$$€ z = (\text{gross basic salary} + \text{allowances}) / \text{yearly weekday hours}$$

Eligible salaries are pinned to the hourly rates in the Table below (including Employer National Insurance and other contributions) and personnel limits per project:

Role in Project	Maximum Hourly rates 2024	Maximum Hourly rates 2025	Maximum Hourly rates 2026	Limits per project
Management	up to €55.13/hour	up to €57.89/hour	Up to €60.78/hour	Max 2 per project
Senior Researcher ⁴ or equivalent	up to €38.86/hour	up to €40.80/hour	Up to €42.84/hour	No Limits
Researcher ⁵ or equivalent	up to €27.84/hour	up to €29.23/hour	Up to €30.69/hour	No Limits
Operational, technician, research support assistant or equivalent	up to €15.27/hour	up to €16.03/hour	Up to €16.83/hour	No Limits

The rates stated in the table above are for the years 2024-2026. For subsequent years a 5% increase per year is allowed. Kindly ensure that only hourly rates are provided in the application form.

⁴ The term ‘senior researcher’ is to be used for a postdoctoral researcher with a specialist and high level of local and international experience in the field. Individuals possessing a high level of experience in industry can still be considered. The applicant is to confirm this judgement with MCST well in advance of submitting the application form.

⁵ The term ‘researcher’ is to be used for a Bachelor’s, Master’s or a Ph.D. degree holder and hence the hourly rate should be equivalent to the degree held by the relevant individual.

Personnel in salary brackets that are higher than those noted above will still only be reimbursed at the rates of the eligible brackets above, depending on their role in the project. The hourly rates will have to be noted in the application, along with the number of hours on the project per individual. In the case of existing personnel, the names of the individuals will have to be noted in the application and their respective CVs need to be submitted.

Students can be engaged on the project and be paid an annual stipend of €6,000 when reading for a full-time master's degree or an annual stipend of €8,000 when reading for a full-time Doctoral degree. In the case of a part-time Post-graduate degree, the respective stipend will be calculated pro-rata and at the discretion of the MCST.

Completed time sheets are to be retained for all personnel (including students), as proof of the number of hours spent on the project. Documentation of the utilisation of the employees' internally funded, research quota for other research activities is to be retained since this evidence may be required by the auditors.

With respect to the following eligible direct costs, kindly make sure that detailed information and specifications are provided for individual line items.

- **Specialised equipment:** Purchasing and leasing of specialised equipment including software. For an individual item of equipment over 20% of the project value, it is recommended that specifications and justification are provided in the application form. If a specialised laptop or PC is going to be purchased, kindly specify its usage and specifications. The overall value of specialised equipment cannot exceed 30% of the project value.
- **Consumables:** The overall value of consumables cannot exceed 30% of the project value.

Kindly note that specialised equipment and consumables collectively, cannot exceed 50% of the project value.

- **Travel:** Travel is permitted for attending of a conference or coordinating with foreign collaborators or stakeholders with a maximum of €2000 (**excluding indirect costs**).



9.1 Subcontracted Activities

Subcontracted Activities must not exceed 25% of the project value. Subcontracted Activity is any activity related to the project, (including but not limited to consultancy), which is not carried out directly by the Beneficiary or its employees but is conducted by any third party (local or foreign) individual, company, partnership, or entity, under whatsoever terms and conditions.

Subcontracting to foreign companies should only be resorted to if suitable expertise is not available locally at a competitive price. This course of action must be duly justified. The Beneficiary may consider joint bids from subcontractors (local or foreign) if these are presented in the form of a supplier consortium. Preference will be given to partners who have previous experience working together on similar projects. Beneficiaries have to ensure that there is no discrimination between bidders, and that all bidders are to be treated equally and transparently in all calls for quotations.

9.2 Audits

Eligible Costs are to conform with the following, and are subject to the final audit scrutiny:

- Any expenses incurred during the project's lifetime must be consistent with the principles of economy, efficiency, and effectiveness.
- In the event of purchases of any value, private entity beneficiaries are required to demonstrate adequate market testing, by obtaining three quotations from three different, independent, and relevant sources.
- Any calls for the recruitment of staff on a project must be well advertised and conducted in a strictly transparent manner including an interview process.

9.3 Eligible Indirect Costs (Overheads) and Other Operating Expenses

Overheads will be covered at 20% of direct eligible costs for all line items being requested.

9.4 Ineligible Costs

The non-exhaustive list below demonstrates examples of ineligible costs:

- ✓ Expenses related to loans, interest, etc
- ✓ Recoverable value added tax (VAT)
- ✓ Expenses which are recoverable through other funding mechanisms
- ✓ Re-purchase of equipment originally procured through other funding mechanisms



- ✓ Opportunity costs related to foregone production and production downtime arising from the allocation of resources to the Project
- ✓ Any activity related to the reproduction of a commercial product or process by a physical examination of an existing system or from plans, blueprints, detailed specifications or publicly available information.
- ✓ Standard office equipment/ stationery
- ✓ Organising conferences or businesses lunches
- ✓ Personnel hours for travelling
- ✓ Dissemination fees
- ✓ Scientific Publication costs
- ✓ Scientific Information costs

Kindly note that this is a non-exhaustive list, and any line items not seen to be compliant with the nature of the research excellence programme will be subtracted from the grant.

9.5 Collaborators

Should the applicant have any collaborators, these must be included in the application form. The expected contribution/s by the said collaborators should be stated and supported by a **letter of intent**. These collaborators may be foreign or local. They are not eligible to receive funding through this proposal.

Should a letter of intent be absent for a specific collaborator, that collaborator will not be considered at evaluation stage. Moreover, the respective letter of intents should be composed within the last three months before the deadline of the application.

9.6 Co-Financing

The following rates of co-financing shall be applicable:

The Programme's financial contribution to a Beneficiary which is applying under the *de minimis state aid option* shall be limited to 90% of eligible costs incurred by that Beneficiary. Therefore, such a Beneficiary must contribute the remaining 10% to the Project. It is not possible for a Beneficiary to cover the contribution of 10% 'in-kind'. This includes, but is not limited, to limited liability companies, Partnerships and Higher Education institutes.



10 Evaluation

Project applications will be evaluated through a three-step process. Primarily, projects will undergo an administrative compliance evaluation. In instances where errors in the budget are noted during the evaluation process, these will be categorised by the Council into major deviations (**affecting 10% or over of the grant value**) or minor deviations (**affecting less than 10% of the grant value**) e.g., if the grant value requested would be that of €50,000, any errors in line items which cumulatively exceed the budget by €5,000, would be considered as a major deviation. Minor deviations will be amended by the Council and evaluated on that basis. The beneficiary will be given the opportunity to accept or decline proceeding with the project if awarded. On the other hand, major deviations will be considered as administratively non-compliant.

If deemed successful, a project application will be forwarded to a Committee of Evaluators for an external evaluation and subsequently for a Due Diligence assessment. Failure to achieve a minimum of 70% pass from the external evaluation will fail the project application. For a project application to be successful, it must pass all three steps.

The projects will be ranked alternating from the next highest ranked project from option A to option B starting from option A until the funds are consumed. For clarity, the order of awards will be as follows (subject to the availability of funds):

1. Top ranked project for option A
2. Top ranked project for option B
3. Second ranked project for option A
4. Second ranked project for option B

The pattern will continue until all funds, or eligible project, are exhausted.

In the event that the Due Diligence assessment results in too high an exposure risk to the Council, the Applicant will no longer be entitled to participate in the project or further assurances may be requested.

External Evaluators will be evaluating project applications for the following criteria:

Scientific Excellence (50%): Threshold 35%

- ✓ Are the proposal's aims and objectives clear? Are these they reasonable and ambitious within the context of this programme? Is the proposal's scientific basis and research methodology to be implemented clear?



- ✓ Is the research innovative? Does it challenge current methods, barriers, or applications in its field? What is the likelihood that the research will lead to new discoveries or fundamental advances within its field?
- ✓ Is there potential in the proposal to contribute to the organisation's research base and scientific excellence, with the clear potential to upskill current or new researchers?
- ✓ Does the proposal appear to be technologically and practically feasible in achieving the set-out objectives? Does the research develop or employ novel concepts, approaches, methodologies, technologies, applications, treatments, tools, and/or interventions?

Impact (25%): Threshold 15%

- ✓ Is the proposal compelling and would it result in a disciplinary or interdisciplinary advancement?
- ✓ Does the proposal address National, European Union or Global Priorities? Has the proposal been able to characterise the influences and impacts that the basic research has on the end-users of research, and on society at large?
- ✓ Does the proposal outline potential impacts resulting from dissemination measures or describe in detail the possibility of journal publications? Are these publications open access?
- ✓ Does the proposal contain a mechanism for assessing success and evaluating outcomes? In the case of positive outcomes, does the proposal present a strategy for further research to be conducted?

Implementation (25%): Threshold 15%

- ✓ Does the proposed project participant have the required skills and expertise to undertake the project successfully and deliver the objectives?
- ✓ Have any co-collaborators been identified? If yes, is their support enforced with a letter of intent with specified activities? Are the skills and resources of the co-collaborators complimentary with those of the applicant? If no, is it clearly justified why throughout the application?
- ✓ Is the general scientific and technical approach proposed sound and credible? Are the tasks proposed appropriate for the timeframe allowed? Is the proposal coherent and effective in terms of the work plan, including appropriateness of the allocation of deliverables, tasks and resources?
- ✓ Is the requested budget appropriate and convincing in relation to this proposal's ambitions? Are the line items being requested pertinent to the within the project? Are they consistent with the current market price of those items?

- ✓ Have potential risks been described and will they be managed as such to ensure the best possible chances of success in the outcomes of the research?

Other considerations:

If two or more projects obtain the same mark following evaluation, then MCST shall give priority to that project which provides the best consideration to the implementation of gender equality in the research project.

10.1 Quality Proposal Acknowledgement

Should a proposal score more than 80 marks yet not be granted due to funds being consumed by higher ranked proposals, the proposal will receive a "Quality Proposal Acknowledgment" (QPA). Using the QPA, the Council will seek further funding on behalf of the applicant. Please note that there is no guarantee that these funds will be secured in favour of the proposal. The applicant will be notified following the evaluation and ranking of all proposals if they receive a QPA.

The Council will have 3 months from the notification date to seek the funding requested and respond to the applicant. Should a project be granted further funding through this mechanism, the awarded process (Further evaluations, agreement, etc.) continue as regular. Should the 3-month window elapse, the project will not be successful and will not be granted funding. Should multiple proposals be provided with a QPA and insufficient funds provided to grant all QPA projects, the Council will respect the ranking devised through the evaluation process and award the next best ranked projects. Should a project receive funding but is rejected by the applicant for any reason, then the QPA mechanism no longer applies.

11 Post Selection Process

11.1 The Grant Agreement

Following the successful evaluation of the application, the Beneficiary will be invited to sign a Grant Agreement establishing the terms and conditions governing the financing of the project. The Grant Agreement will include the original project proposal as an annex. The beneficiary will be expected to execute the project in line with the original proposal.



Hard copies of the Grant Agreement must be signed by the beneficiary within one (1) week from the date on which the Project Coordinator receives them. The Project Coordinator must ensure that the respective legal representative/s are available to endorse the Grant Agreement within this 1-week timeframe. Failure to endorse the Grant Agreement within the stipulated timeframe may result in a withdrawal of the offer for funding.

11.2 Start Date and End Date

The project will start on a pre-determined date as agreed by all the respective parties and as stipulated in the Grant Agreement. The start date is deemed as the date of the countersignature by the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Malta Council for Science and Technology (Hereinafter referred to as the “Agreement Date”).

MCST will endeavour to transfer the first tranche of funding to the project account held by the Beneficiary as soon as possible after the Agreement Date, as described in the Grant Agreement. Between the Agreement Date and the Start Date, the Beneficiary should ensure that all activities required for a smooth project start are completed. These may include but not limited to:

- ✓ obtaining quotations for procurement purposes
- ✓ issuing a human-resources call
- ✓ opening a bank account for the depositing of the first tranche

To be eligible for funding, all expenses must be incurred between the Start Date and the End Date of the Project.

12 Double Funding

Funding under this Programme is made available on the basis that the project Beneficiary would not have benefited and will not benefit from any other grant or financial incentive of whatever nature, applied for and/or utilised for the same scope as that subject of the funding requested under this Programme. Provided that, in the case where the application covers work that is part of a larger project, the Beneficiary must submit a table as an appendix to the application form that shows a comprehensive list of the items of work and the source of funding for each item.

By signing the Grant Agreement, Beneficiary is automatically accepting and authorising MCST to exchange essential information related to the project with other funding agencies,

both local and overseas, for any necessary checks. Any occurrence of double funding should be communicated in writing to the Unit Director prior to the signing of the Grant Agreement.

13 Funding, Management and Progress Monitoring

13.1 Allocation and Disbursement of Funding

For the purposes of funding and reporting, a project submission shall be considered to be a **single stage (an 18-month period)**.

Total financial contribution over the lifetime of the project shall not exceed the funding limit as established in the Grant Agreement, irrespective of actual expenditure.

Periodic funding will be allocated according to the following schedule:

1. At the beginning of the project, MCST will provide the relevant pre-financing to the Beneficiary. This will include both direct and indirect eligible costs.
2. A retention consisting of 20% of the project grant shall be withheld by MCST and only released upon the successful completion of the project. The amount of retention will be deducted from the pre-financed funds.

The Project Coordinator will be required to submit a Final Technical Report at the end of the project, as well as a Final Audited Financial Report. The latter must contain a detailed account of the actual expenditure disbursed for the project.

13.2 Final Financial Audit

Upon the termination of the project or following the expiration of the Grant Agreement, it will be required to submit a Final Technical Project Report together with an Audited Final Financial Report for the whole project, thus covering the work and expenditure undertaken. The Final Financial Report must be audited by certified auditors appointed by the entity. Such appointed auditor/s shall be deemed responsible for the financial audit of the relevant entity and approved by MCST, once submitted. The financial audit must determine the total eligible costs, which costs are to be compared to the funds forwarded to the entity. The MCST reserves the right to appoint an independent auditor to audit the Project Financial Audit as submitted by the applicant. Upon finalisation of the financial audit, the technical audit may be performed based on the templates provided by the MCST.

When the audits are finalised and verified, the MCST shall release the retention money due to the Beneficiary. In the case of overpayment, the Beneficiary will be required to refund the unutilised to MCST.

13.3 The Technical and Financial Reports

The Technical and Financial Report shall include:

- ✓ An account of the activities and achievements carried out in the lifetime of the project compared with the contents of the application as originally submitted.
- ✓ An account of actual expenditure compared with the originally submitted, budgeted expenditure. Financial reports must be signed by the person responsible for the financial management and assembled as per the instructions laid down in the Grant Agreement.

The applicant is obliged to make use of the Technical and Financial Report templates which are provided by the MCST together with the Grant Agreement.

In addition to the audit verifications, the MCST may, at its discretion and as it deems fit, also conduct a detailed audit, consisting of a financial and a technical section, following the completion of the project. The 3-part audit will consist of the following:

The Financial Audit

- Accounts
- Physical Inventory
- Time-sheets and payslips
- Receipts for all equipment and consumables
- Bank statements for the R&I Project Account

The Project Management Audit

- Schedule management
- Change management
- Deliverables
- Achievements compared with Key Performance Indicators

The Technical Audit

- Brief summary of the project including scientific hypothesis investigated in the research
- Interpretation of Research Results

The MCST reserves the right to request additional project-related information and conduct intermediate audits at any time as it may deem necessary.

If a project is found to be in breach of the Grant Agreement or should it materially depart from the contents of the originally submitted application, the MCST reserves the right to retract the award and the applicant may be required to refund the Grant in part or in full. In any such event, the MCST may also exclude an applicant from participating in future calls of the Programme.

13.4 Accountability

Applicants must keep a separate bank account or records, which must be clearly distinguishable from its other accounting records. All relevant expenses must be recorded in this account.

Eligible expenses must have been determined in accordance with the usual accounting and management principles and practices of the Applicant. Direct eligible costs must be backed up with the relevant documentation.

14 Dissemination and Externalisation

14.1 Referencing

Any articles and text material published in relation to the completion of tasks proposed in the project should include the words:

‘Project <Project Name> financed by the Malta Council for Science & Technology, for and on behalf of the Foundation for Science and Technology, through the FUSION: R&I Research Excellence Programme’.

Any websites or printed material related to the project should also include the MCST logo, the Ministry logo or any other logo related to this Programme, and as provided by MCST, where possible.

If any printed material is published without a mention of the Research Excellence Programme and MCST, the Beneficiary shall be obliged to publish a correction at its own expense in the subsequent issue of the publication or for it to be edited accordingly in the cases of online publications. In the case where such publicity does not mention the Research Excellence Programme and MCST, associated costs will be considered ineligible and will not be considered to fulfil any deliverables proposed in the application form.

15 Supervening Circumstances

The Project Coordinator is obliged to immediately advise the Council, of any internal or external significant event which might either affect the validity or the implementation of the project. This obligation applies to the entire period between the submission of the preliminary project application and the completion of the project.

The MCST shall acknowledge receipt of the said notification within five (5) working days. The reply will either give such directives as it deems necessary for the furtherance on the project or re-assess the project in its entirety accordingly.

Failure on the part of the Project Coordinator to comply with this obligation may be deemed by the MCST to constitute material non-compliance on the part of the Beneficiary and the MCST may, thereafter, take such action as is necessary in terms of the Grant Agreement, and in consequence of such non-compliance.

15.1 Default

If the implementation of a project becomes impossible or implementation is not completed, MCST shall be entitled to take any action it deems necessary, including, but not limited to, the withdrawal of funding for the project and the collection of refunds of money already paid out. A similar course of action may be followed if a project is in default as a result of not meeting one or more of its obligations. Prior to taking any drastic action, the MCST will provide a maximum of two notices indicating a rectification period of one month each.

16 Interpretation of Rules

This document endeavours to establish comprehensive and clear rules governing participation in this initiative. However, should circumstances arise where the rules are inadequate, unclear, ambiguous, or conflicting, the Council shall exercise its discretion in the interpretation of the rules or will extrapolate the rules as necessary through the setting up of an ad hoc committee. These current Rules repeal any Rules previously issued and constitute exclusively the entire Rules issued by the Council.



APPENDIX 1

TECHNOLOGY READINESS LEVELS (TRLs)

TRLs are a means to define endpoints of projects along the innovation axes from Basic Research to the Market, ranging from TRL 1 (Basic Concept) to TRL 9 (Market Entrance).

Technology Readiness Level	Definition	Explanation
TRL 1	Basic principles observed and reported	Lowest level of technology readiness. Process concept with basic scientific foundation
TRL 2	Technology concept and/or application formulated	Scientific research begins to be translated into applied research and development. Applications are speculative and may be unproven.
TRL 3	Analytical and experimental critical function and/or characteristic proof-of-concept	Active research and development is initiated, including analytical / laboratory studies to validate predictions regarding the technology.
TRL 4	Scientific & process validation in laboratory environment	Basic technological components are integrated to establish that they will work together.
TRL 5	Scientific & process validation in intended environment	The basic technological components are integrated with reasonably realistic supporting elements so it can be tested in a simulated environment.
TRL 6	System / subsystem model or prototype demonstration in an intended environment (ground or space)	A representative model or prototype system is tested in an intended environment.
TRL 7	System (full-scale) prototype demonstration in a real operational environment at pre-commercial scale	A prototype system that is at the planned operational system.
TRL 8	Actual system completed and validated as capable commercial system	In an actual system, the technology has been proven to work in its final form and under expected conditions.



TRL 9	Full commercial application and technology available for consumers	The system incorporating the new technology in its final form has been used under actual mission conditions.
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