



National Centre of Artificial Intelligence

Research Fund Framework

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1 Introduction

NCAI is aiming at promoting fundamental research, education and advanced, scalable computing resources that collectively enhance fundamental research in Artificial Intelligence (AI). NCAI provides Pakistani researchers with a platform to lead the nation in expanding the frontiers of research and grow AI industry following international trends and seek solutions to the indigenous problems of Pakistan through AI meeting the challenges of sustainable development goals.

With PKR 200 Million at its disposal under the head of the research fund as per mentioned in the NCAI PC1, NCAI aims at funding the novel ideas and projects to provide public services and stimulate the research and development and economy creating an impact in the society while supporting initiatives, innovative research, and many other programs.

2 The Funding Lifecycle

The funding process follows a linear lifecycle that includes creating the funding opportunity, receiving applications, making award decisions, and successfully implementing the award.

The specific actions along the lifecycle are grouped into three main phases as below:

- ❖ *Pre-Award Phase – Call for Proposal and Application Review*
- ❖ *Award Phase - Award Decisions, Notifications and implementation*
- ❖ *Post Award, Reporting, Closeout and impact mapping*

2.1 Pre-Award Phase

The pre-award phase represents the beginning of the grant lifecycle, which includes announcing opportunities, receiving and reviewing applications. Below are the steps of the pre-award phase.

- Call for Proposal Announcement
- Receiving Applications/proposals from Potential Grantees/Awardees
- Application Review Process

2.1.1 Call for Proposal Announcement





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NCAI in collaboration with HEC, will prepare and publish call for proposals which includes all the pertinent information and requirements for an applicant to assess their eligibility, competency, and interest in the funding opportunity.

2.1.2 Receiving Applications

Following the announcement of call for proposals, the NCAI will start receiving applications from potential awardees. Any application received after the deadline shall not be entertained for review process.

2.1.3 Application Review Process

Once the application submission deadline passes, NCAI under the guidance of National Steering Committee (NSC) & Higher Education Commission (HEC) will review the applications. The specific process for reviewing an application will follow the below steps:CPD

- i. Initial Scrutiny of Proposal,
- ii. Provision of all proposals to reviewers/start of review process case to case basis,
- iii. Assigning of proposals to reviewers (experts) Review process progression (pitching/ examination of proposals/ selection /finalization),
- iv. Recommendation of the Central Project Director (CPD)
- v. List of shortlisted awards with justification, along with remarks of the reviewers, will be shared with the Grant Committee comprising members from NCAI Sect and HEC to proceed further,
- vi. Final list by the Grant Committee will be shared with NSC for their review and final input and further suggestions if any,
- vii. Final award decision by the reviewers,
- viii. Award announcement by the NCAI Secretariat

2.2 Award Phase

Once reviewers completes the application review process, the Award Phase begins. The final approval decisions rest solely in the hands of NSC, NCAI Sect reviews and makes





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award recommendations based on the programmatic and financial reviews of the applications. These recommendations are reviewed by a series of levels in the agencies to ensure high-quality, fair, and unbiased decisions.

NCAI Sect will make the selection of the reviewers against each project proposal and have the review conducted. Once reviews are received, NCAI will prepare a recommended list of awardees to be finalized by the Grant Committee, comprising members from HEC and NCAI Sectt.

2.2.1 Notice of Award

Once the final award decisions are made by the reviewers, NCAI sends a Notice of Award (NOA) to the awardees selected for funding. When the awardee accepts the grant (i.e., by signing the grant agreement) they become legally obligated to carry out the full terms and conditions of the grant set by NCAI Sectt. However as an award recipient, awardees are to abide by the policies of NCAI, and HEC.

2.3 Post Award Phase

The post award phase comprises a significant amount of work over the duration of the award dates, which includes implementing the grant, reporting progress, and completing the closeout requirements. The Grant Committee that makes the award to the awardees is also there to assist and ensure awardees /organization comply with the grant terms and conditions.

2.3.1 Reporting

NCAI monitors the progress of awardees and expenditures through various programmatic and financial reporting procedures, as well as using performance metrics per the grant agreement. While the majority of award recipients carry out the grants ethically and efficiently, these monitoring procedures are necessary to maintain transparency and necessary compliances.





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2.3.2 Auditing

NCAI Sectt. will monitor and analyze research, financial, and commercialization activities to do the necessary auditing of the awardees following the bylaws and agreements duly signed by the concerned awardees.

2.4 Closeout

The closeout step is where the grant process ends. In order to complete a closeout, the award recipient, must submit the final financial and programmatic reports. They must submit all financial, performance, and other reports required under the grant within 90 days after the grant award expires or is terminated. NCAI will review these reports to ensure compliance of all the grant terms and conditions as well as to make sure awardees spent all the funds appropriately.

3 Eligibility Criteria to be an Awardee

Any researcher having an idea or has done initial research in AI or related technologies is eligible to apply for the NCAI Research Fund. She/He would be required to submit proposal in collaboration with HEC affiliated institutions as consortium partners following the policies and structure set by the NCAI Sectt.

The proposed funded projects would be expected to develop a product or service which would positively impact, inter alia, the economy, solve a current problem, meet a market need, utilize local raw materials, move current products up the value chain, create employment.

3.1 Duration of Project

Life of each project will be for a period of not exceeding than two years

4 Reviewers' Selection

Based on the financial size, scope and technical considerations of project/research, reviewers shall be chosen from a pool of local experts based on the themes of the research/project by NCAI Sectt in consultation with HEC.





5 Grant Committee

Grant Committee shall comprise of NCAI Sectt and HEC members as below:

- Executive Director HEC (being Chair of the NSC committee)
- Program Coordinator (Member)
- Central Project Director NCAI (Member)
- Program Manager NCAI (Member)
- Research M&E Officer (Member)
- Business Development Manager - Finance (Member)

5.1 Responsibilities of Grant Committee

The Grant Committee will be responsible for the following:

- a. Select appropriate grant reviewers for the approval of the grants (Reviewers to finalize the Grant awardees)
- b. Keep updated the NSC members for their final input
- c. Facilitate the awardees with due diligence and process various legalities
- d. Advise the awardees on issues and policies regarding current or potential grants and awards.

6 Conflict of Interest

It must be ensured that there is no conflict of interest in the selection of the reviewer and grant Committee. Such conflicts can include financial interests, personal disagreements, or professional opportunism. Reviewers and members of grant committee shall be required to sign a document that may disclose any conflicts of interest with applicant.

7 Distribution of Funds

The research fund of PKR 200 Million shall be utilized in following heads

a. Research Fund

13 grants of 15 million of research projects/proposals to be granted to the eligible candidates/awardees depending on the nature and scope of the project.

b. Operating Cost

2.5 % of research fund i-e 5 million to be kept to manage administrative





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expenditures incurred on the management of the fund, breakup of which is attached as Annexure 1.

c. Payments for Peer-Review

Each proposal shall be examined by independent reviewers. Local reviewers shall be given preference and international reviewer shall be requested only in special cases. Local reviewers shall be called in secretariat for fixed number of days to complete the review process. Reviewers will be paid @ 10,000/- for the review process in addition to TA/DA.

d. Monitoring and Evaluation Activities

Monitoring visits shall be done by NCAI nominated personnel at grantee's premises to evaluate the progress and compliance to policies. For this purpose, TA/DA shall be given out of the research fund.

e. Payment for other Expenditures

Payments shall be made 'on actual bases' through fund for necessary expenditures linked with performance of the research fund. These payments may include issuance of newspaper advertisements, graphic designing for brochures, payment to interns, sustainability of secretariat account and management staff involved in the process etc.

f. Data Portal

A data portal for the purpose of data sharing and conducting online monitoring of projects shall be developed. The payment for the development of this portal shall be made out of Research fund.

8. Financials

a. Terms and Conditions

All approved funds for research shall be released annual installments on completion of predefined milestones/deliverables subject to provision of financial and technical progress reports. The mobilization advance shall be released within 4 weeks of signing of contract by both the parties i.e. the NCAI Sectt. and the selected grantee. All funds shall be released by NCAI in favor of bank account of the project. Tentative funding structure of milestones of each is as follows:

Under no circumstances, funds received for any type of research can be operated through





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personal bank account. In case of volition, legal action may be initiated against the offenders. .

- Finance section of NCAI shall keep copy of Fund Release Letter along with copy of cheque in NCAI repository, for file record, reference and for future correspondence.
- Annual financial statements of the project account shall be shared with NCAI and placed in the case file in NCAI for monitoring, reporting and record.
- PI/Project lead shall initiate a request for opening project account in the concerned bank and to be operated by PI and one nominee.
- NCAI shall have the authority to stop any funding in process at any time, if project progress is not up to the mark.

b. Profit Sharing

When any of the awardees start earning profit, it shall bound to pay 5% of the profit money to NCAI.

9. Proposed Organizational Structure for Awardees

Awardees have the authority to propose a structure of their team according to their funding and research project and deliverables. Since PIs and Co-PIs are full time faculty members of the University / Degree awarding institutes, therefore salaries will depend on the percentage of time he/she gives to the research/project, and on the projects overhead budget percentage.

Hierarchy of the organization shall be designed in such a way that there should not observe any bottlenecks/obstacles in communication between the team members and it should complement the delivery of deliverables.

10. Evaluation Rubrics

In the research grant application form, NCAI details the five criteria that they will use to judge entries by the reviewers. Applicants will make sure that their research compasses all five areas to be compliant and successful.

a. Impact





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- i. How will the proposed project/research address a societal challenge, and to what extent?
 - ii. Is the application grounded in research and data about the problem and the solution?
 - iii. Is there a clear plan to deploy the AI model for real-world impact, and what are the expected outcomes
- b. Feasibility.**
- i. Does the researcher/team have a well-developed, realistic plan to execute on the proposal?
 - ii. Does the team have a plan to access a meaningful dataset and technical expertise to apply AI to the problem?
 - iii. Have they identified the right partners and domain experts needed for implementation?
- c. Use of AI**
- i. Does the research proposal apply AI technology to tackle the issue it seeks to address?
- d. Scalability**
- i. If successful, how can this project scale beyond the initial proposal?
 - ii. Can it scale directly, serve as a model for other efforts, or advance the field?
- e. Responsibility**
- i. Does the proposed use of artificial intelligence align with NCAI's objectives and values?
- f. Novelty**
- i. Does the subject research is genuinely novel and that there is no plagiarized material including self-plagiarism?





11. Checklist

Checklist to ensure a holistic review of proposal developed whether it followed all guidelines which for sure made application pass successfully initial grant phase and other documents which must be completed against each proposal/proposal during the tenure of the project.

- | | |
|--|-----|
| 1. Proposal form and application is to be submitted as per provided proposal guidelines and does the checklist provided in the proposal form is complete in all regards. | Y/N |
| 2. Review report must be filled by the reviewers as per the guidelines | Y/N |
| 3. Business Model Evaluation Form. | Y/N |
| 4. Award Letter | Y/N |
| 5. Contract Agreement. | Y/N |
| 6. Policy Points | Y/N |
| 7. Project Outcomes | Y/N |
| 8. Budget Format | Y/N |
| 9. Physical Verification | Y/N |

10. Important Links

- Sustainable Development Goals, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300>
- NCAI, <https://ncai.smme.nust.edu.pk/>
- Facebook NCAI link <https://www.facebook.com/pages/category/Government-Organization/National-Center-of-Artificial-Intelligence-Pakistan-422660501818066/>
- HEC, <https://www.hec.gov.pk/english/pages/home.aspx>

