



Research Networking Scheme (RNS) - 2024 Call 2

Rules for Participation – State Aid

1.0 Introduction:

Xjenza Malta is receiving proposals under the Research Networking Scheme (RNS).

This scheme will be made up of two components as follows:

1. Networking Scheme: This Scheme will support opportunities for collaborative initiatives between Maltese eligible undertakings (as defined below) that meet the eligibility criteria and at least one foreign counterpart of proven track record of excellence. Proposals should describe the nature of the joint activities that would be funded through this Scheme. Applicants are to demonstrate how the proposed activities contribute towards and align with achieving the goals of the National R&I Strategy and to describe the potential of any activities to become self-sustaining or generate longer-term outcomes.

The activities that will be funded under this Scheme should promote internationalisation through at least one of the following:

- the development of joint teaching curricula for Masters or PhD students.
- placements for local researchers in foreign institutions for the purposes of furthering research & innovation collaboration.
- the arrangement of strategic and targeted visits by local academics/researchers and representatives of private entities to foreign entities in order to participate in research & innovation activities of an exploratory and developmental nature.
- the organisation of seminars or workshops on a particular research and innovation area held in Malta that would benefit from the participation of foreign experts.

- the development of transnational research & innovation proposals for submission to third party-funders, e.g. AGRIP, EASME - COSME, EPLUS, Horizon Europe, Life Programme, etc.

2. Open Access Journal Support: This opportunity will support researchers who have already benefited from Xjenza Malta research grants to publish their research done with the support of the RNS grant on a peer reviewed open access journal. The publication should be strictly related to projects funded by Xjenza Malta.

The Scheme will provide assistance to undertakings that carry out an economic activity within the meaning of Article 107 TFEU and will be implemented in line with the terms and conditions of Commission Regulation EU 2023/2831 of 13 December 2023 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) (herein referred to as the *de minimis* Regulation).

2.0 Definitions

- Applicant means any entity eligible to apply in terms of these Rules for Participation and who consequently applies for funding under this scheme.
- Coordinator entity/ Project Coordinator is one of the beneficiaries of a project consortium that is appointed as the single point of contact between Xjenza Malta and the consortium partners from proposal submission to project end. The coordinator entity will have the responsibility of ensuring that all the partners involved in the consortium are eligible and supervises the project workflow with the help of WP leaders. Additionally, the Coordinator entity will be required to submit the project application on behalf of the consortium and must also compile and submit reports /

deliverables to the funding bodies which in turn will relay these documents to the Lead Agency.

- Managing Authority refers to Xjenza Malta.
- Eligible undertakings are defined as undertakings planning to carry out Fundamental Research, Industrial Research or Experimental Development projects 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) a limited liability company; or c) a professional body; or d) NGOs; or e) Non-profit making entities (including Foundations); or f) Cooperatives.

'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 the person to practise 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 credibility and responsibility.

'NGO' means any Voluntary or Non-Governmental Organisation set up in accordance with The Voluntary Organisations Act (Cap. 492 of the Laws of Malta).

'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.

- Letter of support is a document where the entity listed as partner in the project is showing their commitment in supporting the project including (if applicable) the confirmation of additional funding.
- Operating base in Malta means if the legal entity:
 - a. owns, leases, or has been given the right of use by a third party, an adequate premise from where to conduct an eligible economic activity in the region of Malta;
 - and

- b. employs at least one person that is based in Malta and is liable to pay income tax in Malta.
- Partner is defined as a partner in a consortium of a funded project.
 - Single Undertaking includes all enterprises having at least one of the following relationships with each other:
 - i. One enterprise has a majority of the shareholders' or members' voting rights in another enterprise;
 - ii. One enterprise has the right to appoint or remove a majority of the members of the administrative, management or supervisory body of another enterprise;
 - iii. One enterprise has the right to exercise a dominant influence on another enterprise pursuant to a contract entered into with that enterprise or to a provision in its memorandum or articles of association;
 - iv. 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.Enterprises having any of the relationships referred to in points (i) to (iv) above through one or more other enterprises shall be considered to be a single undertaking.
 - Undertaking covers any entity engaged in an economic activity within the meaning of Article 107 TFEU, regardless of its legal status and the way in which it is financed.

3.0 Eligibility Criteria

The applicant must be an eligible undertaking (as defined in Section 2.0 of these rules under the term eligible undertakings) that carries out an economic activity within the meaning of Article 107 TFEU.

Applicants who have other funded projects with the Managing Authority and are in default, and/or have gone beyond the timelines of the project, are not eligible to participate.

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 declares as non-compliant or defaulting on any other contract or agreement entered into with the Managing Authority, shall be automatically declared as inadmissible.

Funding under this scheme is made available on the basis that the Applicant has not 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 scheme.

Networking Scheme: Eligible applicants are to partner up with international institutions with a proven track record of excellence and experience in the research and innovation field that will form the basis for cooperation.

Open Access Journal Support: Eligible applicants can apply for a grant to publish their research on an open access journal. The published research should be related to other research projects funded by the Managing Authority.

N.B. In case an applicant applies for both the Networking Scheme and the Open Access Journal Support and is awarded for the Open Access Journal Support only, the award will be granted only if the applicant has benefited from a Xjenza Malta grant related to the publication.

4.0 Financing

Each applicant is invited to provide a breakdown of the anticipated costs to carry out the proposed activities as part of the application form. Xjenza Malta reserves the right to negotiate any amount quoted by the applicant should this be considered as being over-estimated.

The amount of aid awarded to any one successful applicant under the Networking Scheme is capped at €8,000. Applicants who apply for the Open Access Journal Support can have their grant increased by a maximum of €4,000, totalling to up to €12,000.

Eligible costs:

- flights for travel related to the project (the total amount for each flight should be estimated as costing no more than €1,000 for EU countries and €2,000 for non-EU countries and should be an economy class ticket);
- travel insurance (obligatory with all flights funded with RNS grant);
- subsistence allowance (inclusive of accommodation and travel from and to airport) - when subsistence costs are calculated the local entity's pre-approved subsistence allowances should be used;
- Conference Registrations attended abroad and related to the project (up to €2,000)

- catering and up to two hosted meals per day (strictly in relation to meetings, workshops and seminars hosted by the applicant in Malta);
- information and promotional material (as long as these are necessary to ensure the effectiveness and success of the collaboration);
- Media Articles and outreach related to the project (up to €1,500). (Publications for open access journal are not eligible under this clause);
- Publication in an open access journal (When the Open Access Journal Support is awarded). There is a limit of one publication for each grant.

Furthermore, supplementary or match-funding from the foreign partner is allowed and encouraged, as long as it does not finance the same activities that will be funded through the Research Networking Scheme (RNS). Proposals including such supplementary or match funding from partner institutions will be prioritised.

Xjenza Malta will provide funds at the start of the collaborative project.

Funds related to the Open Access Journal Support will be provided once we have proof of the publication (a copy of the publication) and all the relevant receipts related to the publication.

Ineligible costs:

- Consumables
- Equipment
- Internal Invoices (Invoices issued by the beneficiary (i.e. to hire their own venue)
- Expenses related to loans, interests and recoverable value added tax



- Expenses related to travel and subsistence for the international partners when events are held abroad.

No double funding is permitted for the same activities carried out in RNS and in conjunction with other schemes.

Award holders will be responsible for arranging all relevant activities including, but not limited to, travel plans, accommodation, logistics planning, insurance coverage for any participant travel, etc. The Applicant should provide an approximate breakdown of the anticipated costs to carry out the project's activities in the application form. These can be altered in accordance with section 8 of these rules for participation.

Participants will be funded if the amount they request falls within the allowable quota for aid under the *de minimis* regime. Article 3(2) of 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 Managing Authority.

Applicants will be required to submit a signed *de minimis* declaration form indicating any *de minimis* aid received and/or applied for during the applicable three-year period.

Additional Provisions

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

- Any expenses incurred during the project must be consistent with the principles of economy, efficiency, and effectiveness.

5.0 Submission of Application Form

Interested Applicants are to submit their application form electronically to the Managing Authority at networking.xjenzamalta@gov.mt keeping Mr. Robert Cauchi robert.cauchi@gov.mt and Dr. Alessandra Loria alessandra.loria@gov.mt in copy with "RNS - Application 2024" as a subject heading by not later than Friday 8st November 2024 at 23:30pm.

The application must be dated and signed by the applicant and the legal representative. Late or incomplete applications will not be considered.

Submissions should include the following documents:

- the 'Research Networking Scheme - 2024 Application Form' provided by Xjenza Malta that is associated with this call.
 - letters of support from all partner institutions, confirming any matching or additional funding.
 - full CVs of principal investigator/s from local and partner institution/s.
 - profile of potential partners.
 - agenda of event, activities, training etc.
 - *de minimis* declaration form

It is the responsibility of the applicant to ensure the timely and correct delivery of the application form to Xjenza Malta. It should be noted that large email 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 of the call will not be considered and will be deemed administratively non-compliant.

6.0 Selection Process

Applications will be assessed by a selection panel set up by Xjenza Malta against the following criteria that have the same weight.

In the case of the Networking Scheme (i.e. the collaborative portion of the scheme) the following criteria will apply:

- Quality of Project/Activity:
 - Proposals will be evaluated on the quality of the collaboration activities with the foreign partners. Activities must either be, or be supportive of, high quality international research & innovation with the potential to yield mutually beneficial results and demonstrate innovation and interdisciplinary in the selected field of interest. The involvement of early career researchers (i.e. at Masters or PhD level) in the implementation of the internationalisation activities will be considered an advantage.

- Strength of Partnership and Leadership:
 - Projects/activities must be led by recognised experts with a demonstrated track record in research and innovation and good leadership ability. Evidence of past collaborative work between the partnering institutions, for example, joint projects or publications, and any other relevant past achievements will be considered a testament to the strength of the partnership.

- New partnerships between local and foreign entities in the interest of furthering R&I collaboration are also encouraged with the aim of fostering closer ties between local and international institutions. A convincing case should be made for the benefits of the partnership(s).

- Outcomes and Sustainability:
 - Proposed activities must have significant potential outcomes, including, for example, joint publications, subsequent grant bids, development of innovative products, etc., and will build longer term international relationships based on a genuine commitment by the partners to invest in a sustained successful partnership. Evidence of the potential to attract or generate external funding will be considered an asset.

Priority will be given to well-defined proposals which demonstrates increased odds of success for securing third party-funding or which demonstrate a clear benefit to enhancing the international dimension of local research & innovation activity.

In the case of the Open Access Journal Support the following criteria will apply:

Excellence of the proposed project idea to be published on the open access journal
- 30%

- Novelty of the research idea or approach.
- Relevance of the proposed project to the goals of the open-access journal.
- Significance of the research question or problem being addressed and coherence in the presentation of ideas and logical flow of the proposal including research objectives.

Impact Factor - 50%

- Reputation and credibility of the open-access journal/s in the relevant field.
- Consistency and quality of publications in the journal/s.
- Reach and dissemination of research published in the journal/s, including citations and readership.
- Inclusion of the journal in reputable indexing services (e.g., PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science).
- Journal metrics such as the Impact Factor, Eigenfactor, and h-index.

Likelihood of publication in the intended journal/s – 20%

- Alignment of the proposed project with the scope and focus areas of the intended journal.
- Track record of the researchers/authors in publishing in similar journals.
- The status of the publication.

7.0 Award Duration

Upon successful completion of the evaluation stage, it may be necessary for Xjenza Malta to negotiate the amount of the Award requested in the application form. Xjenza Malta retains the right to provide awards of a different sum should the amount in the 'breakdown of costs' appears to have been overestimated.

The deadline for completion of the projects/activities funded through the award is one (1) year from the starting date on the grant agreement, although projects may be completed at any point within the one (1) year time frame. When the grant awarded includes both the Networking Scheme and the Open Access Journal Support, the time frame will be 18 months. Requests for extension of the award will not be considered.

Any activities/deliverables related to the award cannot start before the grant agreement is signed by Xjenza Malta legal representative.

All financial Invoices/Receipts should be dated through the lifetime of the project. Payments done outside the lifetime of the project will not be accepted. Upon completion of the activities/projects, the applicant is to submit a final report within 30 days according to a standard template developed by Xjenza Malta. The final report will need to be accompanied by all relevant documentation, including receipts demonstrating how the award was spent. Xjenza Malta retains the right to audit the financial documentation and to request further proof of expenditure of the award. Should there be a significant discrepancy between the sum of the award disbursed by Xjenza Malta and the amount spent by the applicant (as substantiated through receipts or other financial documentation) Xjenza Malta retains the right to request a reimbursement of the unspent funds.

8.0 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 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.



No transfer of funds is allowed between the Networking Scheme and the Open Access Journal Support

Kindly note that with respect to transfer of project funds, these should be reflected in the final financial report.

Applicants are reminded of the importance of retaining all documents proving expenditure of the awarded funds for submission with the final report.

If the implementation of a project becomes impossible, Xjenza Malta 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. However, Xjenza Malta will provide a notice indicating a rectification period of one (1) month.

9.0 Correspondence

Any communication, notice or report shall quote the Agreement number in the subject or title.

Successful applicants will be required to inform the Managing Authority at networking.xjenzamalta@gov.mt at Xjenza Malta regularly of any direct or indirect outputs resulting from this award during and beyond the lifetime of the award.

Reference to this award should be made on any publication, marketing or PR material that is generated in relation to the project or activity undertaken.

10.0 Final Reporting

Successful applicants are also required to submit a detailed report on the activities undertaken to the Managing Authority within thirty (30) days from the date of completion of the activities funded by the Award. For those activities extending for the full duration of this Scheme (i.e., one year from the starting date on the grant agreement), final reports should be submitted to Xjenza Malta by no later than 30 days from that date. Xjenza Malta reserves the right to take any necessary legal action should such reporting not be submitted.

Required documents as final report:

- i) Final Technical Report
- ii) Final Financial Report
- iii) Other financial documents as flight tickets, boarding passes and other receipts.
- iv) A copy of the publication in open access journal and all relevant receipts (if applicable)

11.0 State aid Rules

Assistance provided in line with these National Rules for Participation is in line with the terms and conditions of Commission Regulation EU 2023/2831 of 13 December 2023 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) (herein referred to the as de minimis Regulation (link below)).

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 Managing Authority. This three-year period is assessed on a rolling basis.

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

Undertakings in all sectors may be eligible for assistance under these National Rules for Participation, with the exception of the following, as per Article 1 of the *de minimis* Regulation:

- i. Aid granted to undertakings active in the primary production of fishery and aquaculture products.
- ii. 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.
- iii. Aid granted to undertakings active in the primary production of agricultural products.
- iv. Aid granted to undertakings active in the processing and marketing of agricultural products, in one of the following cases:
 - a) 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;
 - b) Where the aid is conditional on being partly or entirely passed on to primary producers.
- v. 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.

vi. Aid contingent upon the use of domestic good and services over imported goods and services.

Where an undertaking is active in the sectors referred to in points (i), (ii), (iii) or (iv) above, and is also active in one or more of the other sectors falling within the scope of the *de minimis* Regulation 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 Managing Authority 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 (link below) will be respected.

Applicants will be required to submit a signed *de minimis* declaration indicating any *de minimis* aid received and/or applied for during the applicable three-year period.

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.

Xjenza Malta 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').

More information on the *de minimis* regulation can be found on the following link:
<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2023/2831>

12.0 Referencing and Acknowledgements

Any articles and text material related to the project should include the words:

'Project <Project Name> financed by Xjenza Malta through the Research Networking Scheme (RNS).'

This acknowledgement will need to be included on any dissemination material submitted to the Managing Authority to be considered as fulfilling the obligations of the grant agreement.

This is fundamental for the completion of the open access portion of this grant.

In the case where printed material is published without a mention of the RNS and the Managing Authority, the beneficiary shall be obliged to publish a correction at its own expense in the subsequent issue of the publication. In the case where such publicity does not mention the Research Networking Scheme and the Managing Authority associated costs will be considered ineligible.

13.0 Interpretation of the Rules

This document endeavours to establish comprehensive and unambiguous rules governing participation in this initiative. However, should circumstances arise where the rules are inadequate, unclear, ambiguous, or conflicting, the Managing Authority shall exercise its discretion in the interpretation of the rules through the setting up of an ad hoc committee.

14.0 Confidentiality of Submissions

Unless otherwise indicated, all application submissions shall be treated in strict confidence.

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

- i. The National Rules for Participation;
- ii. COMMISSION REGULATION (EU) 2023/2831 of 13 December 2023 on the application of Articles 107 and 108 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union to *de minimis* aid (the *de minimis* Regulation);
- iii. Data Protection Act, Chapter 586 of the Laws of Malta and Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Managing Authority 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).
- iv. 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 Regulation (“GDPR”), as ‘processing is necessary in order to take steps at the request of the data subject prior to entering into a contract’.

15.0 Further Information

For further information on the Research Networking Scheme (RNS) kindly contact Mr. Robert Cauchi or Dr. Alessandra Loria as per details below:

Mr. Robert Cauchi

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