

Request for Proposals

September 2020



2020 NZ and China (NSFC) COVID-19 Collaboration Fund

Overview

The Health Research Council of New Zealand (HRC) and the National Natural Science Foundation of China (NSFC) have established this funding initiative **to address the global threat of COVID-19** and to support the development of collaborative research relationships between the two countries. Each will provide matched funding to the research partners in their own country. HRC has a fund of **\$1 million** (exclusive of GST) available for allocation to New Zealand-based researchers.

Through this Request for Proposals (RFP), the HRC and NSFC ('the funding partners') are seeking to fund high-quality collaborative research that advances knowledge and technologies to prevent, diagnose, and manage COVID-19, building on the combined strengths of research groups in New Zealand and China.

Funding partners invite applications for funding of up to **\$350,000** (fully-costed, exclusive of GST), noting that the total available funding pool is \$1M, and with durations of up to **two years** for a research project.

The funding partners are jointly responsible for funding decisions. HRC funding will support the successful New Zealand project team(s), and NSFC funding will support the Chinese project team(s) in the same collaboration. This RFP applies only to the New Zealand application process; Chinese researchers must consult with NSFC regarding their own separate application requirements and process.

It is anticipated that funding for **three projects** will be available for a **mid-2021** start date. The HRC's strong focus on peer review and contestability will ensure successful applicants deliver the highest quality research outcomes.



1. Background

On March 11, 2020, the COVID-19 outbreak was declared a global pandemic by the WHO. The spread and potential lasting existence of COVID-19 pose severe threats to global health, with over 28 million confirmed cases and over 900,000 confirmed deaths worldwide as of September¹. Among these numbers, New Zealand has reported 1798 confirmed and probable cases, and 24 deaths². The second outbreak of COVID-19 in the Auckland community, following initial elimination of the virus, illustrates the ongoing nature of the challenge both in New Zealand and beyond its borders.

In response to this global health challenge, this initiative aims to facilitate research responses to COVID-19 through establishing new and/or strengthening existing collaborations between Chinese and New Zealand researchers from universities and research institutions, fostering breakthroughs in biomedical research that will advance the global response to COVID-19, and promoting mobility and career development of researchers within joint projects.

Under the overarching framework of the New Zealand Health Research Strategy, the objectives of this initiative are to:

- Generate evidence to strengthen New Zealand's response to the current COVID-19 disease threat, with consideration to Te Tiriti o Waitangi, diverse communities and advancement of health equity;
- Leverage international research and infrastructure capabilities in areas posing significant health-based challenges to New Zealand and our international partners; and
- Profile New Zealand health science and innovation, and our ability to contribute to global health challenges.

2. Research project requirements

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This grant will create opportunities for New Zealand scientists to identify and exploit opportunities through collaborations with Chinese researchers. Applicants to the scheme will conduct health research using existing collaborations and identify opportunities to improve health outcomes and healthcare delivery in relation to COVID-19. Investment will focus on building knowledge and technologies to prevent, diagnose, and manage COVID-19.

While the research will build on relationships developed over time, the proposed project must be a new one. Proposals must involve a genuine collaboration with at least one Chinese research team. The proposed collaboration should be additional to the research organisations' current activities and requires joint input of both the New Zealand and the Chinese team to be successful. Successful proposals will present a vision for long-term, sustainable international collaborations.

Research projects may focus on, but are not limited to, one or more of the key themes outlined below:

¹<https://covid19.who.int/>

²<https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/covid-19-current-situation/covid-19-current-cases>

- Screening and development of broad-spectrum anti-COVID-19 drugs;
- Aetiology and pathogenic mechanisms of animal-derived viruses and protective immune mechanisms against virus;
- New technologies for rapid and precise diagnosis of coronavirus;
- Aetiology and pathogenesis of coronavirus infection;
- Development of prevention measures and methods of diagnostics;
- Development of antiviral and restorative therapy schemes, search for medicines; or
- Antiviral immunity and immune system functions.

Please note that it is not the intention of this initiative to invest in vaccine research.

It is anticipated that research collaborators will demonstrate the potential benefit to New Zealand from the proposed international partnership. This may, in part, be through access to research infrastructure, such as datasets, equipment and technologies, intellectual property and expertise, but is also expected to be through specific, measurable, time-bound outcomes that will benefit New Zealand.

3. Characteristics of the research project

The research proposal needs to provide information on:

- The **appropriateness, soundness and rigour of the study methodology and design**, while allowing for solutions to be developed in a flexible manner.
- How the proposed research **builds on existing relationships and strengthens existing collaborations**. It is anticipated that by building on existing relationships, New Zealand scientists will be best placed to access international expertise, markets, global knowledge and research facilities.
- **Distinct supplementary research activities**, such as how collaboration will enhance each side's technological advantages and complement each other and a clear division of work. This will enable New Zealand scientists to better align with their Chinese collaborators and merge the collaboration into a more significant and integrated work programme.
- A clear **process for deploying research outcomes** (taking into consideration that any actual deployment/commercialisation would be outside the term of the research contract). Activities that could support future efforts to derive economic benefit(s) and be conducted within the research timeframe may include workshops, science exchange and key networking activities.
- How activities contribute to the long-term aim of **generating health and economic benefit** to New Zealand, including consideration of diverse communities and advancement of health equity.

Research grant funding will only be used to support the costs associated with New Zealand-based researchers employed by a New Zealand host institution.

4. Eligibility Criteria

For a proposal to be assessed under this HRC funding round, it must meet the eligibility criteria set out below. Proposals that the HRC determine do not meet these criteria will be declined for funding on eligibility grounds.

- The proposal must be made by a New Zealand-based research organisation or a New Zealand-based legal entity representing a New Zealand-based research organisation.
- The First Named Investigator must be employed by a New Zealand-based research organisation, or a New Zealand-based legal entity representing a New Zealand-based research organisation.
- The applicants must have identified suitable research collaborators from a leading research organisation(s) based in China, which is an NSFC registered institution (http://isisn.nsf.gov.cn/egrantindex/funcindex/orgsearch-list?locale=zh_CN).
- The proposal must be uploaded on time via the HRC Gateway Portal and meet the administrative requirements of HRC.
- Applicants must have submitted a registration on HRC Gateway.

Applicants should also be familiar with the HRC Rules³ when applying.

5. Funding

A total funding pool of **\$1 million** (exclusive of GST) is available for allocation. The funding partners invite applications for funding of up to **\$350,000** (fully-costed, exclusive of GST) and duration of up to **two years**.

It is anticipated that a decision on funding will be made in April 2021 and funding will be available for a mid-2021 start date. Applicants will need to give consideration to this when outlining research timelines; please carefully consider the start date, as applicants will be held to what they have proposed. The anticipated outcome date is tentative as delays to the outcome announcement may be unavoidable.

Applicants should note that if competing proposals are equal in terms of their scientific value, the funding partners will consider best value for money offered by each proposal.

6. Research Team

The research team will require demonstrated expertise in undertaking health research. New Zealand applicants should have Chinese research partners eligible for the matching NSFC funding. Only research proposals with confirmed submission of the counterpart application to NSFC will be considered.

Research teams will collectively require the skills appropriate to undertake the research proposed and this should be clearly outlined in the application.

Applicants should consider that opportunities for capability building of researchers, including early career researchers, is provided for. Diversity of gender and ethnicity within the team should also be taken into consideration.

7. Project Deliverables

A final report including comment, and providing evidence, of:

³<https://hrc.govt.nz/resources/hrc-rules>

- the value of the project in building existing relationships and strengthening existing collaborations;
- the value of the project in leading to economic and health outcomes (e.g. commercialisation), including careful consideration to equity; and
- how the project has contributed to knowledge and advancement in the area of COVID-19.

In addition to research deliverables, regular progress reports will also be required for the project, submitted via HRC Gateway. These reports should detail progress of the project and highlight any risks to its progress. The HRC will confirm the reporting dates in the relevant research contract once a funding decision has been made.

8. Proposal requirements

Clear and coherently written applications are essential in allowing the Assessing Committee to effectively read and assess applications submitted to this RFP.

Applicants will need to outline how their proposal addresses the scope of the RFP and provide a clear justification for the proposed approach along with a description of the project team's ability to deliver the specific components of the study. Applicants will also need to provide a fully costed budget.

Proposals must demonstrate the following:

- The proposal represents **high-quality science**, is **scoped appropriately** and is **relevant to the objectives** of this RFP.
- The project team's capacity and skills to work effectively with a **range of stakeholders and key participants** at the different stages of the study.
- Given the rapidly evolving nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers are encouraged to **consider how their project may be required to adapt to potential changes in environment and/or work situations**. It is recommended that the applicants describe how they will mitigate these potential changes as part of their proposals.
- The consideration of how the research will address **health equity issues** and respond to the needs of population groups at greater risk of adverse health outcomes. How the research will **mitigate any potential of perpetuating current inequities** through a mitigation plan (or similar).
- Applications must be from **teams with a range of skills and experience**. An outline of the project management and organisational support available to the project should be included, with appropriate project management FTE included in the budget as applicable.
- Plans for study findings to be **disseminated nationally via tailored and culturally appropriate approaches** to a broad range of relevant audiences in order to maximise the utility of the research. Dissemination should also include publication in international, peer-reviewed journals.
- The proposed study is clearly **achievable within the specified timeframe**. The funding partners see the delivery of this research contributing to a wider programme of work. Therefore, time is of the essence. A **detailed project management plan for all stages of the project** should be included with clear and unambiguous milestones and associated timeframes for achieving the desired outcomes. *The likelihood that the proposed study will be successfully*

completed within the stated timeframe will be specifically assessed. Please also carefully consider the start date included in the application, as applicants will be held to what was stated. Applicants should take into account the timeframe for obtaining ethical approval (if appropriate) and should ensure that this does not delay the start of the project.

- The budget is appropriate for the proposed study.

9. Application procedure

All application forms and guidelines are available via [HRC Gateway](#), the HRC's online application system. The **2020 HRC-NSFC COVID-19 Collaboration Fund Project RFP Application Guidelines** provide full details on the application process summarised below.

Step 1: Registration

Applicants are required to submit a Registration via [HRC Gateway](#) by **1pm, 2 December 2020**. This web-based form signals the intent of the applicant to submit a full application. The project title, all named investigators, host organisation and lay summary will be required. These details should be similar to those in the full application although minor adjustments are allowed.

HRC Gateway will forward the submitted Registration to the applicant's host Research Office, who will need to approve the Registration and forward it to the HRC. For organisations without research offices, HRC Gateway will forward the Registration to the HRC.

All named investigators must have an HRC Gateway account (*with an updated profile*), to be able to be included in an application. Creating an HRC Gateway account is easy and can be done by clicking on 'New user – sign up for HRC Gateway' on the HRC Gateway homepage (<https://gateway.hrc.govt.nz/>).

Step 2: Full Application

Applicants are then required to complete a full application. Full applications should be submitted via HRC Gateway by **1pm, 9 December 2020**.

Applicants should use the **2020 NZ and China (NSFC) COVID-19 Collaboration Fund RFP Application Form**, **2020 NZ and China (NSFC) COVID-19 Collaboration Fund RFP Budget Form**, and **New Zealand Standard CV Template**.

HRC Gateway will forward the submitted full application to the applicant's host Research Office or designated research manager who will need to approve the full application and forward it to the HRC. For organisations without research offices or a research manager, HRC Gateway will forward the full application directly to the HRC.

HRC Gateway will create a PDF of the complete full application after submission. Please note that applicants are not required to submit hard copies of applications to the HRC.

Applicants must meet the deadlines above for their proposal to be eligible.

Full applications will be screened against the eligibility screening criteria (outlined on page 3). Applications which do not meet the criteria will not proceed to full assessment. Applicants who do not meet the eligibility criteria will be informed prior to peer review commencing.

10. Assessment Procedure

The ***2020 NZ and China (NSFC) COVID-19 Collaboration Fund Assessment Criteria*** outlines the assessment criteria. Applicants are advised to familiarise themselves with these criteria.

The assessment procedure is summarised below.

Step 1: Peer Review

Full applications will be assessed through an external peer review process managed by the HRC. This involves comprehensive peer review by independent national and international experts.

Step 2: Applicant Response (Rebuttal)

Applicants are given the opportunity to view the peer review reports for their application and provide a response (rebuttal) to the comments made. This is not an opportunity to rewrite major sections of a proposal, but rather the opportunity to respond to specific peer reviewer comments, to answer questions raised by the peer reviewer, or to clarify an issue for the Assessing Committee.

Step 3: Assessing Committee

An independent Assessing Committee will assess applications, taking into consideration the peer review reports and applicant response (rebuttal). The Assessment Criteria are outlined in ***Appendix 2*** of the ***2020 NZ and China (NSFC) COVID-19 Collaboration Fund Application Guidelines***. Applicants are advised to familiarise themselves with these criteria.

Depending on the number of full applications, a triage process may be utilised to determine which applications will be discussed in full at the Assessing Committee meeting. This process would involve committee members scoring applications in advance of the meeting using the assessment criteria to yield a ranked list. The lowest-ranked applications based on the pre-scores would then be triaged and not discussed at the meeting.

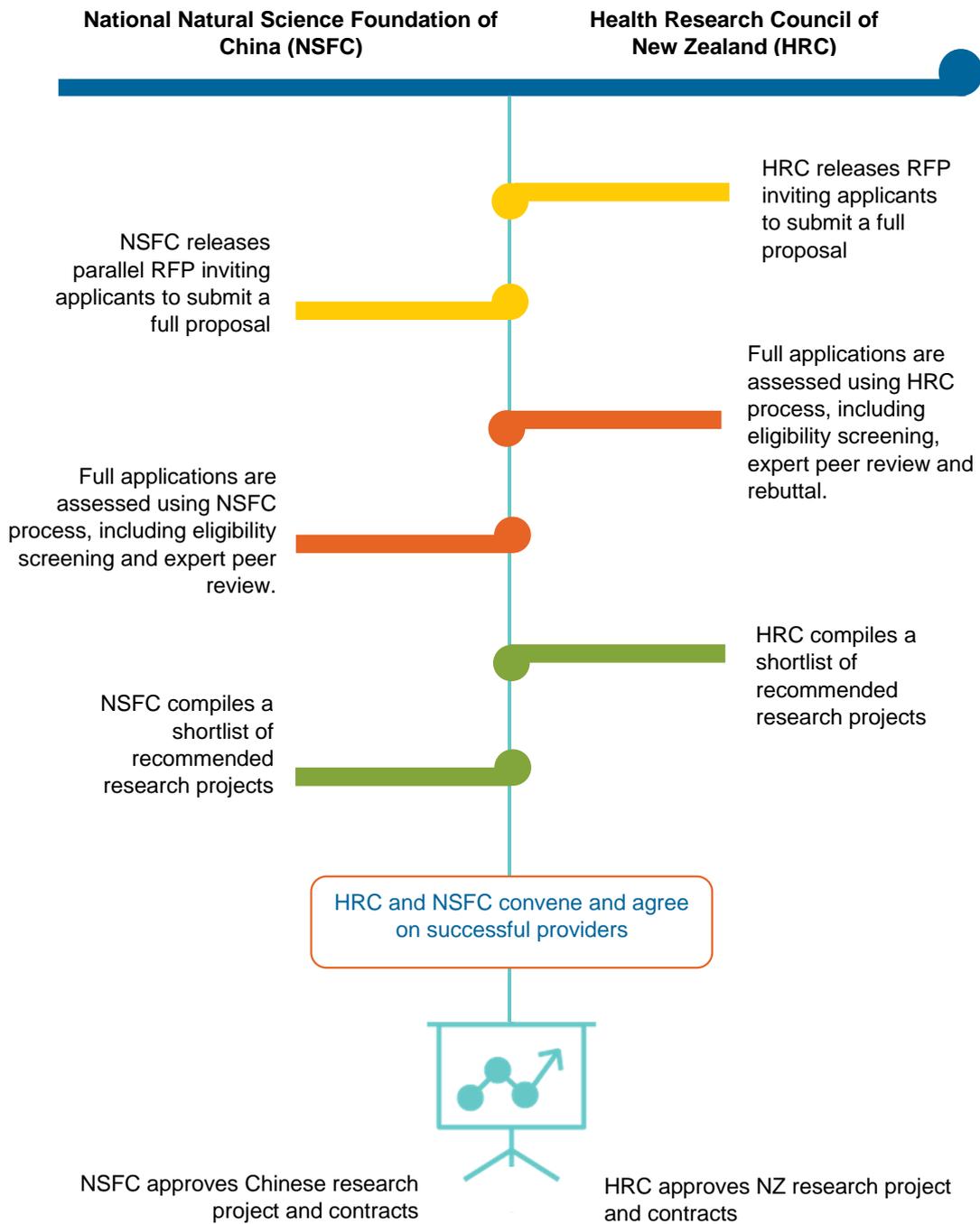
The Assessing Committee will make recommendations for funding, to be considered and approved by the HRC and NSFC. Applicants will be informed of final funding decisions in **late April or early May 2021**.

Key actions and dates for this initiative:

Action	Date
Registration due (via HRC Gateway)	1pm, 2 December 2020
Full application due (via HRC Gateway)	1pm, 9 December 2020
External peer review	December-February 2021

Applicant rebuttal opens	8am, 24 February 2021
Applicant rebuttal due	1pm, 5 March 2021
Applicants notified of outcome	Late April/early May 2021

Diagram 1: Application and assessment process for 2020 NZ-China (NSFC) COVID-19 Collaboration Fund



9. General Notes

Decision Advice

No legal obligations will arise between the funding partners and applicants for this RFP until such time as the HRC enters into a contract with the successful applicant.

Privacy Provisions

In the event that an application is successful, the HRC reserves the right to release applicants' names, details of the host institution/company, contact details (work phone or email), contract title and funding awarded for public interest purposes and to meet the statutory requirements of the Health Research Council of New Zealand Act 1990.

HRC Partnership Programme

This RFP is a component of the HRC's Partnership Programme, through which the HRC forms strategic partnerships with funders and stakeholders to target resources towards developing the evidence-base in key areas of need and strengthen the links between policy and practice. This collaborative approach to research ensures that stakeholders obtain the answers to pressing questions, but split the cost with multiple interested parties. The HRC's processes ensure that the track record of the research team, the scientific merit and the design and methods of the successful proposal are most likely to deliver the highest quality of evidence.

Enquiries

All enquiries related to this Request for Proposals should be directed to Fiona Kenning, Research Investment Manager – International, Research Partnerships (fkenning@hrc.govt.nz or 09 3035208).