

# AI4CI Rapid Response Fund Guidance for Applicants

## About the fund

The AI for Collective Intelligence (AI4CI) Hub's Rapid Response Fund supports small-scale projects that bring together academic and non-academic partners from anywhere in the UK to collaborate on AI for Collective Intelligence research. Funded projects will deliver concrete outcomes that could form the basis for more significant future activities.

### **What is AI for Collective Intelligence research?**

This call aims to fund research projects that target the development and application of AI methods and tools for real-world problems involving the generation, improvement or exploitation of collective intelligence for positive outcomes within human social systems.

#### What do we mean by AI?

We take the term AI to include a wide range of methods and technologies, spanning research in autonomous agents, machine learning, and intelligent systems. We particularly encourage proposals featuring approaches from areas such as multi-agent systems, swarm intelligence, recommender systems, AI ethics and governance and smart agent technologies.

While fields such as autonomous robotics and machine vision may be less clearly related to the AI4CI challenge, they are not explicitly excluded. However, projects in adjacent areas (e.g., data science, data management, data visualization, etc.) that lack a core AI component are unlikely to be funded.

#### What do we mean by Collective Intelligence?

Collective intelligence occurs naturally when agents share and compare information in ways that lead to improved decision-making outcomes for the whole population or its individual members.

This can occur through various mechanisms, including, but not limited to, quorum sensing, consensus formation, division of labour management, crowd sourcing, and can be used to drive collective innovation, collective deliberation and collective action.

In some instances, agents actively and deliberately engage with an explicit shared task, such as to reach a jointly agreed decision. Other cases exploit a passive form of collective intelligence implicit within the pattern of information distributed across a population, such as an invisible hand co-ordinating the pattern of investment in a market.

Collective intelligence can involve aggregation of information to reach a central decision or inform an overarching policy, as well as disaggregation of pooled information to guide tailored decision making for different kinds of individual within the collective.

We are open to a wide range of interpretations of collective intelligence, but proposals must make it central to their research and clearly explain how the proposal aligns with this focus.

### **Who can apply?**

Projects must involve one or more UK academic partners and one or more non-academic project partners. The academic project lead must be [eligible to receive EPSRC funding](#). The project team can

also include additional academic and non-academic co-leads and other staff (e.g., postdoctoral researchers, research engineers, etc.).

The consortium must commit cash or in-kind contributions from the academic and non-academic partner(s), ideally equal to or greater than the funding being requested. In-kind contributions may include staff time, access to equipment, data, software, tools or materials and must have a value assigned to them.

### **What can you apply for?**

We do not anticipate making awards significantly higher than £50,000, but there is no formal limit on the amount that can be requested. Likewise, there is no lower limit on the size of an award, and we are open to funding smaller activities.

We will fund 100% of directly incurred (DI) costs, including research staff time, travel and subsistence, consumables and other [DI costs as allowed by UKRI](#).

Equipment costs exceeding £10,000, directly allocated, estates and indirect costs are not eligible for funding.

Costings should be drawn up with the support of your organisation's finance team and be approved according to your internal processes.

## **Assessment**

### **How your proposal will be assessed**

Proposals are first vetted by the Fund Management Team. If a proposal is deemed unsuitable for review, applicants may be invited to revise and resubmit their proposal based on guidance and feedback from the team.

Proposals deemed suitable for review will be evaluated by at least two anonymous reviewers before being considered by a Rapid Response Fund Panel, which will make the final decision on funding. In exceptional circumstances, the panel may request additional information or clarification from applicants before a final decision is made. Applicants whose proposals are not funded may be invited to revise and resubmit their proposal based on feedback from the Panel.

### **Assessment criteria**

Proposals will be evaluated by reviewers and assessed by the Panel according to the following criteria:

- Quality of the proposal:
  - how well does the proposal fit the call; how feasible is the research; how sound is the thinking; how appropriate is the methodology; how impactful are the outcomes?
- Alignment with the 4Cs:
  - Collective: to what extent does the proposal engage with collective intelligence as a central aspect, challenge or outcome of the research project?
  - Concrete: how effectively does the proposal define concrete deliverables that will lead to longer-term outcomes?
  - Collaborative: to what extent does the proposal credibly describe collaboration between academic researchers and non-academic partners or stakeholders?
  - Committed: to what extent does the proposal include appropriate resource contributions from the academic and/or non-academic partners?

- Consideration of UKRI’s requirements for inclusive, responsible and sustainable research:
  - In accordance with the [guidance on equality, diversity and inclusion](#) proposals should explain how these principles are considered in the design of the planned research activity: “how it’s designed, how it’s carried out and who is involved”. See [Expectations for equality, diversity and inclusion](#) for resources and examples.
  - Proposals must demonstrate consideration of the [framework of Responsible Research and Innovation](#). This may involve anticipating and reflecting on potential impacts of the research and engaging with diverse perspective such as those from relevant stakeholders, communities, or end-users.
  - Proposals should assess the environmental impact of the research and set out appropriate measures to mitigate adverse effects.
- Justification of costs
  - Proposals should clearly justify a realistic budget aligned with the proposed activities and anticipated outcomes.

## Further information

### Conditions of award

All awards are subject to the award letter and conditions. These are not negotiable and must be accepted by the academic partner prior to the project start. Project leads are encouraged to share these conditions with the relevant teams in their organisations before beginning to write the proposal.

### How to apply

Complete the proposal form and send it to [ai4ci-research@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:ai4ci-research@bristol.ac.uk). Your proposal will be checked by the Fund Management Team and a confirmation email will be sent.

### Deadline and timescales

The fund operates an open call with no formal deadlines. We aim to communicate a decision within six weeks of submission.

The fund may be paused at certain points during the year, such as during periods when the availability of reviewers is limited. Proposals submitted during these pauses will be considered once the fund reopens.

### Reporting requirements

At the end of the project, award recipients must complete a report.

Award recipients are part of our AI4CI community, and we look forward keeping in touch and offering additional opportunities to participate in Hub activities and bid for follow-on funding once the project is complete. The AI4CI Hub is keen to stay informed of any follow-on activities post-project so we may also make contact periodically beyond the completion of the project.

### Confidentiality

Proposals, including related data, intellectual property and other submitted documents, will be treated in confidence by any individuals involved in the assessment process.

## FAQs

### Process

*At what rate will the funding be allocated? For how long will the scheme run?*

The funding will be awarded on a phased basis and we intend to fund projects over the full five-year lifetime of the Hub. As we approach the end of this period we will communicate any final deadlines for this scheme.

*What should be included in a project partner letter of support?*

The letter should confirm the organisation's commitment to the proposed project and should identify the value, relevance and possible benefits to the partner of the proposed research. The letter should clearly articulate the nature of the collaboration or support provided by the partner, and explain how the partner will provide added value. The letter should confirm any cash or in-kind contributions (e.g., staff time, access to equipment, provision of data, etc.), and any in-kind contributions must be assigned a value.

*Can I apply to the fund more than once or be part of a project team on more than one proposal?*

Yes. Applicants may submit multiple proposals over time, provided each one is distinct.

*Can I put myself forward as a reviewer?*

Yes. Please email [ai4ci-research@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:ai4ci-research@bristol.ac.uk). It would be helpful if you could provide any information that will help us ensure you receive proposals relevant to your expertise and if there are any potential limitations on your capacity to participate.

*Can I still serve as a reviewer if I apply to the fund?*

Yes. The Rapid Response Fund process includes explicit consideration of conflicts of interest which will allow us to consider proposals from people who also serve as reviewers.

*Are there restrictions on what the funding can be used for?*

Yes. The funding can be used for Directly Incurred (DI) costs only. Please see [EPSRC's guidance on DI costs](#) for further clarification.

*Can the matching commitment from the project applicants include a contribution from the academic partner(s)?*

Yes. But contributions from academic partners should be resource commitments beyond simply covering overheads and indirect costs; for example, a contribution to the salary of a researcher on the project, or a contribution of administrative support, or access to facilities that would otherwise incur costs on the project.

*Must the cash value of the matching commitment from the project applicants be equivalent to the cash value of the award that is being sought?*

Ideally, the total cash value of the resource committed by the project partners will approach or exceed that of the award, but this is not a requirement for a successful application.

### Research Consortium

*What kind of organisations can be “non-academic partners”?*

Any non-academic organisation is a candidate for this funding opportunity: companies, charities, local and national government agencies, etc. If you are not sure whether the partner being considered is appropriate, get in touch with the [AI4CI Hub](#) and we will advise you.

*Do non-academic partners have to be from the UK?*

No. Non-academic partners can be from other countries and do not have to be from the UK.

*Does my consortium need to include new partners that I haven't worked with before?*

No. Academic and non-academic partners may have an existing track record of collaboration together or may be proposing to work together for the first time, or something in between.

*Do you offer support in connecting applicants with relevant non-academic partners?*

We may be able to suggest suitable partners, depending on the area of research. Please get in touch by email to [ai4ci-research@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:ai4ci-research@bristol.ac.uk) with details of your research idea and we will see if we can help. We also anticipate running match-making and networking events over the lifetime of the Hub, please [sign up to our mailing list](#) to be kept informed.

*Can members of the AI4CI Hub's consortium universities apply?*

Yes. The Rapid Response Fund process includes explicit consideration of conflicts of interest which will allow us to consider proposals from academics with connections to the seven universities that comprise the AI4CI Hub consortium.

*Can non-academic partners receive funding?*

If successful, an award will be made to the lead academic partner, and any subsequent allocation of funds to non-academic partners must conform to the UKRI guidelines. Funds for subcontracting can be awarded to project partners, but this should be to deliver a defined package of work that has gone through the lead academic partner's procurement process, and not just to cover the project partner costs of collaborating on the project.

*Can there be more than one academic partner?*

Yes, there can be more than one academic partner, however we will only award the funding to the lead partner. If the budget is split between multiple academic partners it will be the responsibility of the receiving institution to arrange the necessary agreements for passing on the funding.

## Research

*Can I use the Rapid Response Fund to augment a research project that is already ongoing?*

Yes. The fund can be used to extend existing research activities by adding new collaborators or new research questions.

*Does my research proposal need to align closely with the kind of research that the AI4CI Hub is doing?*

No. Any research involving AI and collective intelligence is suitable for funding under this scheme.

*How can I be sure that my research proposal fits the AI4CI Hub's definition of collective intelligence?*

If you are not sure whether your research idea is appropriate for this funding scheme, get in touch with the AI4CI Hub and we will advise you. Please send an email to [ai4ci-research@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:ai4ci-research@bristol.ac.uk) describing the idea clearly in at most three short paragraphs so that we

can respond quickly, or submit a proposal with clear indication that it is preliminary and that you are seeking feedback.

*Does the fund support research on collective intelligence in animals or robots?*

The fund aims to support research on human social systems. Such projects may involve animals and/or robots, but human social systems should be the primary target of the research.

*Will theoretical research be funded?*

Yes. Theoretical research can be funded if it aligns with the criteria of the fund. While we emphasise practical applications, theoretical research may be eligible if it contributes to the understanding of Collective Intelligence or provides foundational insights that lead to future practical applications.

*Does the AI in a proposal have to include machine learning?*

No. Our interpretation of AI is broad and, in particular, includes approaches and technologies beyond large language models and associated forms of generative AI.