

Proof of Concept Programme

Programme details

INTRODUCTION

The Proof of Concept programme supports the pre-commercialisation of leading-edge technologies emerging from Northern Ireland's universities. It helps researchers to export their ideas and inventions from the laboratory to the global marketplace.

The programme supports the development of early-stage ideas, which will normally have secured or be in the process of securing patent protection or other appropriate forms of protection. It is not simply another source of research funding. Successful bidders must demonstrate that their ideas have originality and true commercial potential. Projects will therefore ideally result in one or more of these possible outcomes:-

- Working prototype/demonstrator
- IP
- Documented Process/Methodology
- Collaborative Research
- Commercial Partners
- Additional funding

It is recognised that the projects supported are high risk and may take several years to become commercially attractive to private investors. Proof of Concept therefore represents a powerful commitment to exploiting research advances and encouraging innovation within Northern Ireland's universities.

OBJECTIVE

The basic objective of the Proof of Concept programme is to improve the level and quality of commercialisation from within Northern Ireland's universities through the provision of funding for early stage development activity.

The programme focuses on a model where individuals or small groups work on short applied projects to develop an idea through to a stage where a route to commercialisation is clear, either as a spin out or by licensing to an existing company.

The funding will be aimed at supporting and developing new ideas, which would normally have secured or be in the process of securing patent protection or other appropriate forms of protection, but which have not reached full laboratory-scale demonstration, or "proof of concept". Because of the embryonic nature of the ideas to be supported, they will generally not be capable of securing funding from commercial sources, such as venture capital funds.

SCOPE

The Proof of Concept programme allows the development of intellectual property to take place in a way which:-

- extends protection of that property
- extends applicability of that property
- improves confidence in its anticipated commercialisation
- underpins the validity of its claims
- demonstrates value

It is still some way from “market” and “job creation” but fills that vital gap between early “blue sky” research and market exploitation.

Proof of Concept projects can therefore be defined as occurring after:

- advances made during curiosity-driven or strategic research
- a background patent has been filed

They can also be defined as preceding:

- full laboratory-scale demonstration of the technology
- pre-production development/prototyping
- availability of commercial funds for development because of the existing level of technical and market risk

ELIGIBLE COSTS

Support under the Proof of Concept will be provided under the broad headings of:-

- Staff costs
- Overheads (@ 40% of staff costs)
- Consumables
- Patent costs
- Subcontracting
- Equipment
- Other (i.e. Trials and testing)
- Audit Fees (Mandatory)

Equipment costs will not normally be eligible for support, but may be considered in exceptional circumstances where costs are small in relation to the project value, and the equipment needed is specific to the research and in addition to what might normally be expected to be contained within a well-furnished laboratory.

LEVEL OF FUNDING

To maximise impact in this important area of economic growth, eligible projects will attract 100% funding.

Assistance available will be up to a maximum of £80,000.

METHOD OF FUNDING

Claims will be submitted at quarterly intervals in arrears. On receipt of a claim for assistance, Invest NI will arrange a visit at which the eligible expenditure on the claim will be vouched against original records and receipts. Payment will also be subject to satisfactory progress against milestones.

DURATION OF PROJECT

As a general rule, projects will be of 6 – 12 months duration, although this may be extendable to up to 18 months by mutual agreement between the university and Invest NI.

APPLICATION PROCEDURE

Proof of Concept operates an open call application process. The Assessment Panel sits twice a year with submission deadlines approximately two months before each panel sitting. Proposals received after each submission deadline will be held over and considered along with those received by the subsequent submission deadline.

The submission deadlines will be published on the Proof of Concept webpage.
www.investni.com/proofofconcept

An Application Guidelines and Application Form are also available from the webpage.

Note that all applications to the programme must be fully vetted & formally approved by

- a) the Research Office**
- b) the university's Commercialisation Office prior to submission to Invest NI.**

Invest NI will also submit copies of all applications to

- a) a firm of patent lawyers**
- b) an independent firm of consultants specialising in market assessment and validation**

SELECTION CRITERIA

Applications should be early-stage ideas which have typically reached patent level, and could lead to the creation of new businesses or the licensing of innovative technologies.

The selection criteria are as follows:-

- Economic impact on Northern Ireland
- Fit with Proof of Concept programme
- Existing IPR
- Competitive advantage through innovation
- Market potential
- Technical work programme

Details on each of these areas are contained in the Application Guidelines.

STATE AID

Financial support from Invest NI must comply with State Aid Rules which means that it cannot be used in any way which could be deemed as anti-competitive. As the funding is 100% grant, it cannot be used to fund company research. **Universities must not therefore involve industrial partners in the project.**

PROJECT MANAGEMENT AND MONITORING

Each project supported under the programme will have an associated Project Management Panel, comprising the university's Project Technical Team (led by the Principal Investigator), a representative from the university's Commercialisation Office, and the Invest NI Technology Executive. The remit of the Panel, which will meet quarterly, is to review technical progress on the project, as well as monitor costs.

The Principal Investigator will record each meeting on a standard Project Management Panel Report provided by Invest NI to cover technical progress and financial spend. A separate written report will not be required.

FURTHER INFORMATION

If further information is required please contact:

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