



## Standards and Guidelines for Centres and Criteria for the Assessment of Applications

### 1. Introduction

The Ministry of Education and Research established “Centres of Excellence in Higher Education” in 2010 as a prestige arrangement for educational activities in higher education. The SFU arrangement, which is managed by NOKUT, is a parallel to Centres of Excellence in Research (SFF) and other top centre arrangements in the area of research.

This document states the standards and guidelines that will regulate the SFU arrangement. The document also describes the criteria that will govern the assessments related to the award of status as SFU.

When assessing applications for funding and status as SFU, and when entering into contracts concerning the establishing of centres, NOKUT will pay careful attention the applicants’ observance of the standards and guidelines laid out in this document.

In the following sections this document describes: the vision and aims of the SFU arrangement (chapter 2), the organisation and duration of centres (chapter 3), the application and assessment process (chapter 4) and the assessment criteria (chapter 5).

### 2. Aims of the SFU arrangement

The SFU arrangement implies a concentrated, focused and long-term commitment to stimulate the development of teaching and learning methods at the bachelor and masters levels of higher education.

The overarching aim of the SFU arrangement is to contribute to the development of excellent quality in higher education and to highlight the fact that education and research are equally important activities for higher education institutions. It is an important aim to act as a stimulant to excellent R&D-informed education<sup>1</sup>.

Academic communities that are awarded the status of SFU must be able to present documentation of excellent quality in established educational provision, have good and feasible plans for further development and innovation in their educational activities and contribute to the dissemination of knowledge about good educational practice. In particular, the SFU arrangement is meant to stimulate and reward work that takes

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<sup>1</sup> With R&D-informed education is meant ‘.....education based the forefront of knowledge gained from research, academic and artistic development work and work experience.’ (Universities and Colleges Act, § 1-3)



place in the interaction of students, teachers, support services and the knowledge base of the education. This means that great stress will be put on the R&D base for all types of educational provision. For educational programmes aiming at specific professions, both the R&D base and relations with the professional field will be of central importance in the assessments.

The SFU arrangement shall:

- stimulate universities and colleges to establish and develop academic communities that provide excellent education
- contribute towards knowledge-based analysis and development of teaching and learning work as a tool for quality improvement and innovation in higher education institutions
- contribute towards good relations between the educational and other relevant societal and professional fields
- contribute towards the development and dissemination of knowledge.

An SFU must therefore:

- provide excellent R&D-based education
- develop innovative ways of working with R&D-based education
- contribute to the development and dissemination of knowledge about educational methods that are conducive to learning.

### 3. Organisation and duration of the centres

An SFU is attached to an educational institution that is responsible for the activity, hereafter referred to as the 'host institution'. Host institutions can be universities, specialised universities or university colleges.

The status as SFU is awarded for five years, with the possibility of a prolongation for another five years. A midway evaluation of the centres is conducted after they have been operating for three and a half years. After this evaluation it is decided whether the centre status will be prolonged beyond five years.

Calls for applications are in principle open to all educational fields, but the Ministry of Education and Research may issue regulating guidelines for individual application rounds. The intention is to advertise new application rounds every three years. The size of the allocations is determined in the national budget. Funds are allocated for the entire duration of the contract period, but the grant for any particular year is dependent on the recognition of the previous year's report and accounts.

The host institution must be the formal and responsible applicant for funding and status as SFU. This implies taking responsibility for the execution of the contract that is set up concerning the centre, as well as for practical, academic and economic concerns associated with the establishing, running and liquidation of the centre. Host institutions may collaborate with other educational institutions or other types of organisations, like for instance pedagogical development centres or units, foundations or organisations with responsibilities in the field of professional practice training, about the establishing, running and funding of the centre. An



association consisting of a host institution and several collaborating partners is referred to as a SFU consortium and the participating partners as consortium participants. Consortium participants must contribute with financial resources in accordance with the centre's finance plan, as described in the application. The host institution must see to it that a consortium agreement is concluded between the participants, where an SFU consortium is established. The consortium agreement must regulate the organising and conduct of collaborative work in the consortium, as well as the participants' rights and obligations.

The funding of the centres must be based on the principle that it is NOKUT, the host institution and possible collaborating partners that contribute collectively with the resources that are required for the running of the centre's activities. The host institution's contribution may consist of allocated funds, work resources allocated to the centre and required infrastructure. The funding that accompanies the award of centre status must therefore be regarded as a top financing that covers the recruitment of a centre leader, further recruitment (for instance PhD fellows), travel costs, funds for necessary internships, etc.

The SFU arrangement builds on a model that implies that the centre is included in the organisational structure of the host institution. Centres must have a clearly defined academic leadership and be organised in such a way that the aims of the project plan can be efficiently reached. They must have an internal organisational and management structure that harmonises with the organisational structure of the host institution, with work routines that ensure effective interaction with possible collaborative partners in the SFU consortium. The key persons attached to the centre must be employed at the centre in full-time positions. Others may have part-time engagements, if these are adapted to the intentions and activities of the centre. The centre must be included in the governance system of the host institution and student participation must be ensured.

#### **4. Application and assessment process**

Universities, specialised universities and university colleges may apply for the award of one or more SFU's. The number of applications is limited to five per host institution. The application must be issued by the host institution. If a host institution submits more than one application, the applications should not be prioritised.

##### **The application**

The application must give an account of the centre's educational activities, its plans for the further development and innovation of its educational activities and its plans for the dissemination of knowledge, in accordance with the aims of the SFU arrangement. The application must be written in English and must not exceed 10 pages.

##### **Assessment of applications**

Assessment of applications takes place in two rounds:

- 1) An assessment of received applications and selection of the best applicants who proceed to the final round.
- 2) Site visits at the locations of the final candidates. The site visits, that include interviews with the centre's students and employees and other observations, shall provide further insight into the academic community



and the activities that are presented in the application.

Assessment of the written applications is conducted by an international expert group of five persons. The expert group must have student representation. When conducting site visits, the expert group is supplemented with specific subject competence. NOKUT selects and appoints the members of the expert group.

The expert group's recommendation concerning the award of centre status is presented to NOKUT's board of governors.

## 5. Selection criteria

An SFU is supposed to be outstanding, both in terms of the documented quality of its established educational provision and in terms of its centre plan, i.e. its visions, strategies and plans for further development and innovation of its educational activities and for disseminating its acquired knowledge to other academic communities. The SFU arrangement is particularly aimed at stimulating and rewarding the work that takes place in the interaction of students, teachers, support services and the knowledge base of the educational activities. This means that great stress will be put on the R&D base for all types of educational provision. For educational programmes aiming at specific professions, the R&D base as well as relations with the professional field will be of central importance. In addition, international orientation, leadership, organisational structure and other infrastructural framework elements will count in the assessments.

A rounded assessment will be made of the applications, based on the criteria that are described below. In the total assessment documented quality in established educational provision will count most. The assessment of the applications will be returned in the form of a written feedback and with graded assessments on a scale from 1 - 6, where 1 denotes poor and 6 denotes excellent quality.

For the assessment of the applications, good documentation is required concerning the quality of established provision. Documentation requirements are specified in the electronic application form.

### **Documented quality in educational activities – ‘educational quality’**

The core element in the process of assessing the applications is the providing academic community's documented strength, compared with other communities within the same educational area, nationally and internationally. It is expected of applicants that they are able to present evidence of excellent quality in their existing provision and thus to demonstrate the centre's potential for further enhancement of their educational activity. Feedback concerning educational quality from central stakeholders (students, alumni, employers, etc.) will be considered in the assessment process.

In the assessment of educational quality, aspects that are considered to have an impact on the teaching and the students' learning process will be considered on the basis of the documentation that is presented in the application: outcome factors, as well as process and input factors in existing provision will be assessed:



### **Outcome factors**

- Assessment of students' achievement, seen in relation to learning aims and learning outcome descriptions.
- Assessment of how the provision's content and delivery are relevant to employment needs and/or further education or research education.

### **Process factors**

- Assessment of the teaching and working methods that are employed and how the students' learning outcomes are assessed.
- Assessment of how R&D informs the teaching and permeates the students' learning. The same applies to collaboration with the professional field, including its further development, where provision aimed at specific professions is concerned.
- Assessment of methods of collecting and following up feedback from students.

### **Input factors**

- Assessment of the existing providing community's academic, pedagogical and managerial competence (relevant areas of knowledge and experience within the centre's operational field).
- Assessment of the way in which the institutional and centre leadership and the academic community are engaged in and support the educational brief and how resources are utilised and developed in an appropriate way.

### **Plans for the centre's activities- 'the Centre Plan'**

Assessment of the centre's visions and strategies, as well as its plans for further enhancement, educational innovation and the dissemination of knowledge about high quality education inside and outside the host institution. High quality in the applicant's established educational provision is a necessary, but not a sufficient, requirement for the award of SFU status.

### **Innovation**

- Assessment of the centre's strategies and plans for innovation and innovative measures, as well as an assessment of completed and evaluated innovation measures for different aspects of the educational provision.
- Assessment of how the awarding of centre status will trigger effects that would not be achieved without support (additionality).

### **Dissemination**

- Assessment of the academic community's own development of systematised knowledge about factors that contribute towards high quality education at the centre.
- Assessment of existing plans for the dissemination of knowledge to other educational communities and the wider society in general, including specific target groups and means of communication.
- Assessment of the academic leadership's engagement in the dissemination of knowledge generated at the centre.
- Assessment of plans to support and stimulate educational enhancement in the host institutions and in other relevant communities.