*Annex 1*

Georgia I2Q - Innovation, Inclusion and

Quality

Competitive Innovation Fund

Guidelines for Applicants

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# ACRONYMS

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| AC | Awards Committee |
| AU | Administration Unit |
| CIF | Competitive Innovation Fund |
| HE | Higher Education |
| HEI | Higher Education Institution |
| MES | Ministry of Education and Science |
| MoU | Memorandum of Understanding |
| NCEQE | National Center for Educational Qualify Enhancement  |
| NDA | Non-Disclosure Agreement |
| OM | Operational Manual |
| SDPs | Strategic Development Plans |
| STEM | Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics |

# PURPOSE OF THIS DOCUMENT

This document provides practical information to potential applicants in preparing and submitting an application for a grant from Competitive Innovation Fund (CIF).

Instructions for applicants are divided into the following main parts:

* Guidelines on preparing a proposal (presented in the form of this document);
* Draft Proposal Submission Form (presented as a separate document – Annex 3 of the CIF Operational Manual).

Applicants can also consult the CIF web-site for up-dates: [www.mes.gov.ge](http://www.mes.gov.ge)

# INTRODUCTION TO THE CIF

## Objectives and purpose of the CIF

The strategic aim of the CIF is to ***'foster modernization of higher education programs and learning environment and strengthen the labour market linkages'***.

The CIF is conceived as a tool that enables university units to link their strategic planning with actual prospects for strategic implementation of these plans. Specifically, the CIF is envisaged as a dedicated instrument to help HEIs to realise their Strategic Development Plans in line with the strategic direction and priorities of Georgia and the Ministry of Education and Science (MES).

Under the overall management of the MES it will provide support to (public) higher education institutions (HEIs) who have the ambition and determination to implement changes that will provide measureable benefit to students, academic and administrative staff, researchers, future employers and other stakeholders. It will enable HEIs to modernise their programs in line with international standards and strengthen the linkages of the programs with labour market needs, upgrade educational programs including teaching and assessment methods, support professional development of academic staff, build stronger linkages with other HEIs both in Georgia and abroad, mainstream innovative and good practice in to the teaching and research environment as they fit to the national culture and environment, and compete in the international research area.The impact of the CIF should enable positive developments in future authorisation and accreditation reports issued by the National Center for Educational Qualify Enhancement (NCEQE) as well as in metrics for Georgia and individuals HEI positions in international teaching and scientific rankings and national statistics for employment.

## Focus for the action (Institutional Beneficiaries)

The CIF will be open and accessible to all public HEIs provided that their applications are aligned with the overall aims and objectives of the CIF, are feasible, and meet the required criteria of quality, relevance, and strategic impact.

## Focus of the action (CIF Projects)

The design of the CIF grants scheme respects university autonomy while encouraging institutions to think holistically about their planning and development. The types of CIF funded projects that are envisaged to be supported include improvement and upgrade of programs to strengthen linkages to the labour market. This may include but is not limited to:

* developing program content (i.e. revision of existing programs or development of new programs) to reflect the latest trends in the field,
* introducing innovations in terms of teaching and learning including support for classroom teaching utilizing technology and modern pedagogical approach, such as problem-solving and project-based learning, and improvement of e-learning methods,
* modernizing educational programs with industry participation, e.g.:

• supporting innovative research by faculty members involving students and industry;

• upgrading processes and enhancing the quality of the labour market surveys and/or graduate tracer studies to improve relevance of academic programs and employment tracking;

• enhancing the quality of laboratories and workshops with modern scientific instruments and equipment to improve student learning;

• conducting joint university-industry development of innovative research designs;

• facilitating industry’s participation in academic research projects (e.g., by receiving access to industry’s sophisticated analytical and other experimental facilities);

• facilitating the expansion of networks and outreach events, that connect current students and graduates that are already employed in the sector, as well as familiarize students with various employment opportunities in relevant industries, organizing networking events, seminars with industry representatives, and boot-camps;

* engaging relevant employers with curriculum development to reinforce the linkages with the labour market,
* modernizing and upgrading labs and physical infrastructure to meet the program objectives,
* improvement of gender imbalances in the education system, especially in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) subjects including supporting HEIs to attract female students to STEM programs and help narrow the gender gap in STEM fields.

## Form of Support

The CIF is a competitive grant instrument. It will award up to 40 CIF grants over a 3-year period from 01.2022-12.2024. The maximum grant amount for the single applicant would be 110 000 USD[[1]](#footnote-1) per project and the maximum grant amount for applicant in the form of consortia would be 200 000 USD[[2]](#footnote-2) per project. Implementation will be coordinated by the MES.

The CIF will be implemented in 2 phase – a pilot in the first year (2022) for around 10 grants awarded competitively followed by additional call for 30 projects in the year 2023.

Future Calls are dependent on securing further funding.

The CIF is initially envisaged as enabling multiple grants per HEI but structured so each grant should have a clear and limited set of linked strategic objectives, clearly visible in the Strategic Development Plans (SDPs) of all HEIs and consortium composition that clearly enables it to access necessary skills and critical mass to achieve its objectives.

The maximum number of grants per theme per funding cycle will be set by MES. Themes will reflect the priorities of the MES for education and science and the I2Q project.

## Eligibility of Applicants

Eligible applicants for the funding windows are:

1. for the public HEIs targeting specific development and innovation issues identified in their SDPs. In this case, a single public HEI is the main beneficent of the project, and
2. for public HEI led consortia projects. Consortia projects involve two or more eligible HEIs (in that at least one public HEI) who are the main beneficiaries of the project.

Proposals under both funding windows must demonstrate partnership arrangements.

Partnerships may involve the national and/or international private sector representatives, national and/or international education or research organizations, as well as non-governmental organization(s). However, users and beneficiaries of the CIF grants must be Georgian institutions, i.e. Georgian legal entities.

### Lead Applicant

The single applicant or the lead partner of a consortia project must be a Georgian public HEI.

To be eligible to submit an application, the public HEI must be authorized by NCEQE.

The decision must be publicly available on the NCEQE website.

In the case where the grant application is built around one or more academic programs, the program(s) should be accredited by the NCEQE. The accreditation decision must be publicly available on the NCEQE website. Program(s) should be granted full or conditional accreditation.

### Consortium and partnership

The public HEI may be a consortium member or form a consortium with one or more Georgian private HEI(s), international public and/or private HEIs, national and/or international private sector representatives, national and/or international education or research organization, as well as non-governmental organization(s).

When submitting a project as a consortium, a signed Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between consortium members should be included in the application.

Any kind of partnership arrangement (beyond the consortium) also needs to be confirmed through the signed MoU.

### Private national HEIs

The criteria for inclusion for private national HEIs are identical to that for public HEIs. See above, section 1.5.1.

### Foreign HEIs

In order to be eligible to be part of consortium, a foreign HEI(s) should be accredited by their national accreditation agency. The accreditation decision should be publicly available on the website of the relevant national agency and/or accessible from another reputable international registry/database.

### Non-HEI partners

Non HEI partners, (including but not limited to national and/or international private sector representatives, national and/or international education or research organizations, as well as non-governmental organization(s)) must submit a copy of their registration documents to confirm their status. The MES has the right to restrict the composition of eligible partners before they publish a call and to request in a Call, specific information to confirm the status of an entity.

## Size of grant

See section 1.4 above.

**Co-funding**: At least 3% of Co-funding is required for the CIF projects. The Co-funding can be demonstrated by cash contribution, In-kind contribution, or combination of both. Contributions that may be provided in form of goods/services/consultancy, etc. without pricing should not be reflected in the project budget, they should be described in the narrative of the CIF grant project in the frames of the activity for which the specific contribution was anticipated. Any evidence of co-financing (cash or in-kind) will be taken into consideration during proposal evaluation.

## Eligible expenditure

The CIF grant will finance the following costs:

1. Purchase and maintenance of new laboratory equipment;
2. Purchase of modern information and communication technologies;
3. Subscriptions to up-to-date electronic databases of scientific journals;
4. Operating costs (up to 2% of total project cost) and administrative costs, including salaries of the grant (up to 10% of total project cost with a potential condition of maximum single salary allowed up to three times national average salaries);
5. Travel to meet consortium partners including costs for visiting professors/researchers from abroad;
6. Technical assistance and training to help implement activities funded by the grant;
7. Costs of an independent external audit;
8. Indirect/incidental costs (e.g. car rental, office supplies, miscellaneous utilities, maintenance and spare parts, consumables, local transport and communication).

The allocation of funds must be well balanced.

The MES has the right to set limitations on some budget categories when each funding window is published.

Grant funds may **not** be requested for activities that include, but are not limited to:

* Interest or debt owed to any party;
* Expenditures and provisions for possible future losses or debts;
* Items already financed through another framework, program or company/institution;
* Entertainment and hospitality expenses, including: banquets, cultural programs; ceremonies and expenses connected with them, such as treating guests and lodging, and tips;
* Alcoholic drinks and tobacco products
* Currency exchange losses, fees and penalties;
* Recruitment or relocation costs;
* Pay interest payments, give out loans;
* Fundraising;
* Value-added taxes and customs taxes and fees;
* Bank commissions and differences in currency exchanges;
* Payment of interest or current debt to any party, including commitments made or undertaken during consideration of Project application, or upon approval of Project financing;
* Costs of items or services that are already being financed by another program or entity;
* Costs/participation in the costs of purchase, lease, sub-lease or adaptation of land, facilities and/or other real estate, including vehicles and movable assets and equipment not designated exclusively for Project related scientific and research activities;
* Costs defined by the sources of funding under the Public Call;
* Activities that require involuntary taking of land resulting in temporary or permanent relocation or loss of shelter, loss of assets or access to assets, loss of income sources or means of livelihood, or involving the involuntary restriction of access to legally designated parks and protected areas;
* Any construction or rehabilitation activities;
* Procurement of passenger/commercial vehicles;
* Purchase/lease of property (real estate).

Budgets must be submitted using the Budget Excel sheet. A summary should be included in the application form.

## Funding Window (calls for proposals)

Each Call will be open for 8 weeks.

## Number of Applications and awards

HEIs may submit more than one application per each funding window. The overall number of grants that any one HEI can secure in a single year may be limited to ensure both that there is a good competition for funding and that there is sufficient internal resource to ensure proper and timely implementation.

# GRANT EVALUATION, AWARD AND IMPLEMENTATION

## Evaluation process

The CIF Grant call is composed of a two-stage evaluation procedure:

1. Eligibility and completeness evaluation;
2. Proposal review and selection.

The evaluation process has been carefully designed to identify excellence irrespective of gender, age, nationality or institution of the applicant and other potential biases. The evaluations are monitored to guarantee transparency, fairness and impartiality in the treatment of proposals.

The evaluation will be conducted by a minimum of 2 Evaluators, one of which should be an international Evaluator. Projects will be assessed based on clear and transparent criteria that are communicated to both applicants and Evaluators.

The individual marks and comments from the evaluators are passed to the Awards Committee (AC) for collation and ranking.

In a case of significant differences between the individual evaluators' scores (when the difference is at least 4 points or when the proposal was rated more than 14 points by one individual evaluator and 14 points or less by another), the AC should ensure the participation of a third evaluator in the evaluation process.

The AC will take the final decision on awarding a grant. Final ranking is done according to the ranking based on achieved points and the available budget.

When a project application is not approved for funding the Applicant will be informed about this decision and receive feedback. This may be used to improve the Application so it could be resubmitted to a further CIF Funding window.

## Appeals Process

Applicants who are not satisfied with the result have the right to file an evidence-based complaint on the outcome of:

a. the administrative check, at the first stage of evaluation (invoking evident omissions, oversights or errors made by the CIF Administration Unit (AU));

b. the evaluation procedure, at the second stage of evaluation (invoking evident omissions, oversights or errors made by AC);

The appeal shall be submitted in writing within 8 calendar days upon the date of receiving the notification about the outcome of the evaluation.

## Grant Awarding Process

The MES will sign the contract with the lead Applicant.

Projects will be financed in two tranches according to the budget, implementation plan and project milestones.

The first payment should not exceed 90% of the total amount of the grant, while the second payment should cover all other eligible expenses that will be incurred under the Grant Agreement and approved by Auditor.

## Grant Implementation period

Individual grant project implementation period will be set at maximum of 18 months.

The decision to extend a grant implementation period will be made by the AC based on an official request from the lead HEI.

A grant may be terminated if the public HEI (single applicant) or the case of a consortium project, any HEI fails to renew its authorization or, in the situation where the grant is built around particular academic program, if the HEI fails to gain reaccreditation.

## Monitoring, Reporting and Auditing

Project Beneficiaries must submit a narrative and financial report every 6 months (MES has the right to amend this before the Call takes place) using the template supplied by the MES. A final audit must be carried out at the end of the project. The cost of the audit may be included in the grant proposal budget.

# EVALUATION CRITERIA

Proposals will be evaluated based on 4 main criteria:

* Quality and relevance of the proposal with an emphasis on the innovation aspect;
* Quality of Partnership;
* Team composition and Budget;
* Implementation plan and Sustainability.

All proposals should be evaluated according to 4 criteria graded by the Evaluators from Excellent to Fail. These grades will automatically be translated in to associated mark based on the rubric below:

0 – Proposal fails to address the criterion or cannot be assessed due to missing or incomplete information.

1 – Poor. The criterion is inadequately addressed or there are serious inherent weaknesses.

2 – Fair. The proposal broadly addresses the criterion, but there are significant weaknesses.

3 – Good. The proposal addresses the criterion well, but a number of shortcomings are present.

4 – Very good. The proposal addresses the criterion very well, but a small number of shortcomings are present.

5 – Excellent. The proposal successfully addresses all relevant aspects of the criterion. Any shortcomings are minor.

Proposals that have an average score of 14 points or less by the two Experts (or three Experts, in the case of three expert participants in the evaluation process) shall not be eligible for funding and shall not be reflected in the overall ranking list of projects.

Each proposal is given equal treatment and Evaluators are offered clear guidelines for what to seek in each section to award a score.

The evaluation methodology is outlined below. These should be read in conjunction with the instructions embedded in the application form.

## Evaluation criterion 1: Quality and relevance with an emphasis on the innovation aspect

The relevant questions related to this criterion are as follows: ***What are the objectives of the project and why? To what degree are the objectives of the proposal aligned with relevant strategies, policies and priorities? What is the envisioned impact of the project on the higher education programs, learning environment and strengthening the labour market linkages? What is the innovation/novelty/uniqueness of the applied concepts and methodology of the project?***

**The project application shall address the following aspects:**

* *Justify the proposed objectives and actions by clear reference to the institutional strategic plan and in particular the SWOT;*
* *Layout the relevant strategic frameworks;*
* *Explain how their own objectives align with the priorities of the strategic frameworks;*
* *Indicate what would be the project impact on the higher education programs, learning environment and strengthening the labour market linkages?*
* *Make clear the ‘state of the art’ in a field and explain how their proposed actions will attain or even exceed this with associated measurable results and impact, for example:*
* *by laying out current programme content and indicating how new content will attain international standards and reflect the latest trends in the field;*
* *by outlining the status of classroom teaching and indicating how new innovations can be introduced that will utilize technology and a modern pedagogical approach;*
* *by explaining current specific weaknesses in linkages between the HEI and the labour market and how these can be addressed by engaging relevant employers;*
* *By explaining how the current labs and physical infrastructure inhibit the HEI from meeting their desired program objectives and how this situation could be improved through modernizing and upgrading;*
* *by indicating the present gender balance in the education system, especially in STEM subjects and detailing proposed actions that will attract female students to STEM programs at the HEI and help narrow the gender gap in STEM fields;*

*etc.*

## Evaluation criterion 2: Quality of Partnership

The relevant questions related to this criterion are as follows:***What partners are involved in the project, and how the partnership was built? What is the quality of the partnership?***

**The project application shall address the following aspects:**

* *Explain how the partnership (or consortium) was built and how the final composition has influenced the design of the proposal, as well as, which partners are involved directly and indirectly in the project;*
* *Explain how the partnership/consortium match the project’s objectives;*
* *Explain**how the core partnership/ consortium adds resources, including skills, knowledge, experience/capacities and access to critical infrastructure needed to carry out the project activities that are not available to the lead partner alone and that are needed to fully implement the project and realise measurable benefits and longer-term impact.*
* *Is it explained how will the partners get the maximum benefit from the project implementation?*

## Evaluation criterion 3: Team composition and Budget

The relevant questions related to this criterion are as follows: ***What resources will be needed (human and financial), to successfully implement the project?***

**The project application shall address the following aspects:**

*Team:*

* *Clearly identify key roles and personnel in the project;*
* *The project manager has a proven track record and relevant experience to lead a complex project;*
* *The project team have sufficient scientific/technological capacity to execute the project and achieve its objectives (key publications and other results, necessary expertise, previous scientific achievements, experience obtained in relevant projects);*
* *The project team have an adequate organizational structure to ensure effective communication (within the project team, with university, partners/consortium, others involved in the project) for implementation of the project.*

*Budget:*

* *Provide a budget that reflects the activities described.*
* *Explain how the budget items fit to the aims and objectives of the project, how they will be used in the activities and how they will help the project to realise its outputs and deliverables.*
* *Outline the essence and proportion of co-financing.*
* *Outline any resources that are necessary or that add value to the project but that are not paid for directly from the CIF grant.*

## Evaluation criterion 4: Implementation Plan and Sustainability

The relevant questions related to this criterion are as follows: ***What is the plan of activities and does it follow a logic structure? How can the outcomes be sustained? What are the risks and mitigation measures?***

**The project application shall address the following aspects:**

*Implementation plan:*

* *Set out a clear but concise plan of activities with associated milestones and deliverables.*
* *Ensure that the plan describes activities including duration, sequencing and links between activities is clear, measurable and feasible.*
* *Provide a Gantt chart to accompany the plan and show clear linkages between different components/work packages.*
* *Offer a risk analysis with mitigation for foreseen risks and contingency for unseen ones/Force majeures.*

*Sustainability:*

* *Demonstrate the ability to ensure the systematization of the good practices generated by the grant;*
* *Demonstrate a clear understanding of the cost of sustaining the activity the future;*
* *Clarify how the state-of-the-art equipment to be purchased for the project will be efficiently used after the project completion;*
* *Quantify and categorise the costs and indicate internal and external future sources of financing that cover the costs.*

# PREPARING AND SUBMITTING A CIF GRANT APPLICATION

## 4.1 Working language

All applications must be submitted in both the Georgian and English languages. In case of difference between the Georgian and English texts of the documents, preference is given to the Georgian text.

## 4.2 Application form

Applications must be prepared using the official application form. Applicants must respect the font size and page/ word limit for different sections. Applicants who exceed the limits will only have the part of their application that falls within the limits read and assessed.

Completed applications must be signed by the Rector of the HEI or a person with authorisation to sign. (Note that the MES reserve the right to contact everyone listed on the team to verify that they have been aware of their inclusion in the application).

## 4.3 Submission of documents

Completed applications must be submitted electronically in the format required by the MES. The documents to be submitted are:

* Proposal (PDF format)
* Strategic Development Plan of the lead Applicant HEI
* CVs of the core team
* Budget (Excel format)
* Implementation plan (Excel Gantt chart)
* Project Deliverables and Monitoring Plan
* Citizen Engagement Plan
* Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed by all partners
* Consortium agreement (in case of consortium project)
* Confidentiality agreement (signed by all partners)
* Legal registration documents of non HEI partners (if applicable)

# POSSIBLE OTHER ISSUES TO BE ADDRESSED

## 5.1 Ethical Issues

Some research activities and methodologies may have ethical implications or may raise questions that will require sound ethical assessment in order to ensure that projects supported respect fundamental ethics principles.

## 5.2 Confidentiality

CIF AU, the AC and all evaluators who have access to the CIF grant proposals must sign Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA). This will cover the period of grant implementation and may be extended by the MSE as they see fit.

# QUESTIONS RELATED TO THE CALL FOR APPLICATIONS

Answers to the most Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) on how to prepare and submit a CIF application are published on the web-site [www.mes.gov.ge](http://www.mes.gov.ge).

1. The grant competitions will be introduced in the national currency. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The grant competitions will be introduced in the national currency. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)