TOP TIPS GUIDE

HOW TO PLAN AND WRITE A SUCCESSFUL INNOVATE UK GRANT APPLICATION

An easy-to-read guide to help you improve your chances of winning Innovate UK funding applications.

This guide is intended primarily for academics but may also provide useful pointers for business partners.

UNIVERSITY OF SURREY

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WHO IS INNOVATE UK?

Innovate UK forms part of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and is the **UK's innovation agency**. Innovate UK provide funding to support and stimulate innovation in the UK economy by **encouraging businesses to work with other commercial and research organisations**.

Innovate UK typically invest in projects that will provide **game-changing**, **innovative, disruptive and ambitious ideas** leading to **new products, processes or services**. The idea should be **significantly ahead of others** in the field and set for **rapid commercialisation**. The project must have the potential to create new markets or disrupt existing ones in an ambitious way.

Projects must demonstrate a strong and deliverable **business plan** that addresses **market potential and needs** and provide a clear, **evidence-based plan** to deliver **significant economic impact, return on investment** and **growth**, with considerable potential to significantly impact either or both, the UK economy and productivity in a positive way.

Most Innovate UK projects must be led by a UK registered business but the University can be a collaborating partner. Typically **research organisations can share up to 30% of the total eligible project costs**. Of that 30%, the University receives funding for the eligible project costs of up to 80% of full economic costs.

! Innovate UK applications are very different to research applications, it is essential that the business takes the lead. The application must be business focused, with deliverable, realistic, adequately resourced plans to achieve return on investment, growth and market share following project completion.

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WHERE CAN I FIND OUT ABOUT INNOVATE UK FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES?

Each Innovate UK funding call has its own **eligibility criteria, scope and deadline**. Opportunities are listed on the **Innovation Funding Service**, where you can find out more and identify which call is right for your collaboration: **apply-for-innovation-funding.service.gov.uk/competition/search**

Make sure your project clearly fits the competition, is in scope and not shoe-horned in. Assessors will notice if it is not a good fit for the competition.

Themed Calls
Most Innovate UK funding calls target specific sectors or technologies. **It is always best to apply to a targeted competition** if your project fits within the eligibility criteria and scope. Themed calls tend to be slightly less competitive**.**

Contracts for Innovation
Innovate UK Contracts for Innovation (formerly known as the Small Business Research Initiative or SBRI) helps public sector organisations to solve complex challenges by running a competitive funding opportunity, to develop and adopt new solutions and technologies. These are single-lead research contracts that academics can also lead on. They often require engagement with clients and end users as part of the project plan.
www.ukri.org/what-we-do/browse-our-areas-of-investment-and-support/innovate-uk-contracts-for-innovation

Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTP)
KTPs have broader eligibility criteria and open rounds throughout the year. They have a significantly higher success rate than other Innovate UK applications. The University of Surrey has had a 100% success rate in KTP applications over the last 10 years. Please refer to our guide on how to write a successful KTP project application: **www.issuu.com/universityofsurrey/docs/top_tip_guides_-_ktp**

> Providing yourself with the time to form the right project consortium, agree the project scope and collaboratively consider the project outputs is critical to preparing a successful application.

WHAT IS THE PROCESS TO APPLY FOR INNOVATE UK FUNDING AND WHO CAN HELP ME?

INTERNAL SUPPORT

Contact the **Surrey Innovation & Enterprise Hub team** if you are interested in applying for Innovate UK funding. **We can help you review the competitions** and may be able to work with you and the business to scope, develop and review your application. The earlier you contact us the more support we are likely to be able to provide! We can also help you to seek advice from previously successful applicants and Innovate UK reviewers within the University.

EXTERNAL SUPPORT

Further support, if required, can be sought from the Innovate UK Innovation Lead for the competition at Innovate UK, or from the Innovate UK Business Connect.

INNOVATION FUNDING SERVICE PORTAL

Once you have selected the funding opportunity that is right for your collaboration, the lead applicant (usually the business partner) should register for the competition on the Innovation Funding Service portal. Please ask the lead partner to invite the following to the portal:

- Yourself.
- **collaborate@surrey.ac.uk** (The Surrey Innovation & Enterprise Hub team).
- **research-support@surrey.ac.uk** (The Faculty Research & Innovation Office team).

You should complete Worktribe in the usual way and the relevant team will help you to progress your project.

GENERAL TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL PROPOSAL

1   **Read the competition guidance notes** under the "how to apply tab" of the competition and structure each section of your application to **answer every bullet point** in a logical way. The keywords are contained in the questions and guidance notes.

2   **Allow plenty of time** - it can take 100-200 hours to complete an Innovate UK grant application.

3   Write a **compelling narrative,** ensuring a golden thread throughout the application. Be enthusiastic and demonstrate that your project is innovative, exciting and inspiring.

4   Use the Project Summary to "wow" and draw the reviewer into your project.

5   Each question has a limited word count. Think carefully about what to include and refer back to the guidance notes at all times. **Be very specific in your answers, ensuring you write clearly and concisely. Use active tense and avoid overly technical language. Remember this is not a technical research application!**

6   Ensure the business clearly articulate who they are, what the big problem is that they are trying to solve, where the **innovation** is and how it will accelerate their business. The lead partner must be able to demonstrate a **strong business case and a convincing value proposition.**

GENERAL TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL PROPOSAL

7 Ensure you have the **right consortium** – where possible demonstrate that you have **engaged with end users and customers** and include them in your project. The lead business must show evidence that their target customers/end users are likely to buy/accept the product.

8 The lead business must demonstrate that they have researched and **know their market and route to market,** it's size and growth potential, and how they will grow their business and increase productivity.

9 Back up your points with **evidence and quantify** as much as you can.

10 Show **equality, diversity and inclusion** throughout the application.

11 **Make good use of the appendices.** This is your chance to present extra information, including diagrams, graphs, tables and schematics. This makes it more tangible. Don't think of them as optional.

12 Read the available Innovate UK general guidance: **www.ukri.org/councils/innovate-uk/guidance-for-applicants/general-guidance/before-you-start-an-application**

> **!** Innovate UK applications are **very different to research applications**. Usually highly competitive and business-led but many allow collaboration or subcontracting to academics. The lead business partner should lead the application development.

DEFINITIONS:
WHAT IS A VALUE PROPOSITION?

A Value proposition:

- Summarises why the customer should buy your product or use your services.

- Speaks to the customer and convinces them that your product or services will add value or solve their problem.

- Highlights what makes you different from your competitors.

- Forms part of the marketing strategy of the business and tells the customers what the company stands for, how it operates and why it deserves their business.

- The Value Proposition Canvas tool below can be used to help ensure your product or service is positioned around what the customer values and needs.

Gain Creators

Products & Services

Pain Relievers

Gains

Customer Jobs

Pains
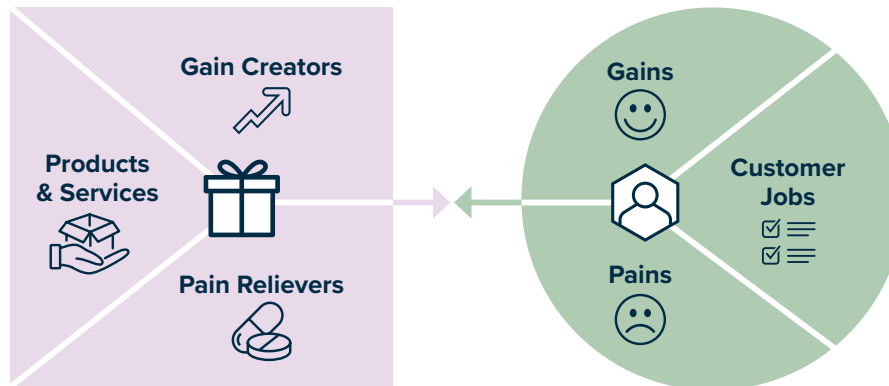
It is the responsibility of the lead business to define a clear and compelling value proposition.

HOW TO ANSWER INNOVATE UK APPLICATION QUESTIONS

An easy-to-read guide to help the team answer typical Innovate UK application questions. Check each competition for detailed guidance

NEED, CHALLENGE AND IDEA

Focus on the business need, clearly describe your idea and innovation, why it is game changing, and the challenge you're addressing.

Describe your **main motivation** for the project in a **convincing** way, defining the **big problem** (unmet business need) and its implications. Describe and **evidence** the **main pain point** and the **big market challenge** and quantify where possible. Demonstrate the gravity of the problem and why others haven't been able to tackle this. Describe, in simple, easy to understand terms, **how your product/service will solve the problem.** Show that you understand the wider context and how the innovation will help you, the end users and customers. You need to have a **strong value proposition** and to demonstrate that you understand the barriers and how your innovation has the **right features and benefits** to meet the needs and challenges.

POINTERS

- Focus on how the market is demanding your product/service. Demonstrate that end users want what you are offering and are willing to pay for it. **Use facts and figures to illustrate the size and scale of the problem** and show the link between your product/service and commercial outcomes.

- Describe **the current-state-of-the-art and its limitations.** Explain the competition and what are they doing. Outline **how your product/services are innovative, unique and better than the competition.**

- Outline any **previous work** the partners have done to respond to the need. This will help to demonstrate your knowledge and experience.

- Demonstrate how your innovation will be successfully exploited in or from the UK to achieve significant market share.

- Outline and **quantify** the **wider economic, social, environmental, cultural or political challenges.**

This section should be driven by the lead business with academic input on the technical challenge and innovation.

APPROACH AND INNOVATION

Describe how you will solve the problem you have identified and how your solution is innovative.

Demonstrate **how you will solve the problem**/meet the need you have identified, focusing on the product/service, not the business plan. Explain what you are doing, how you will improve upon the current state of the art, the **benefits of your product/service and how it is better than your competitors**. Give examples (e.g., how your product/service is cheaper or more efficient).

POINTERS

- Outline specifically what is **new**, and what is **different** about your product/service (e.g., evidence the **technical and commercial innovation**).
- Ensure your product/service is **responding to a market need** (rather than it just being a research project) and state how the product/service is timely.
- Describe how the **innovation is significant** (world leading/game-changing).
- Outline (and quantify) the large-scale commercial potential, ideally for the UK and globally. State how the project fits with any current products/services.
- Make sure the **expected outputs** from the project are clear e.g., report, demonstrator, know-how, new process, product or service design.
- Show you have considered IP. If IP is likely to arise state how you will protect it. Give evidence to support your **freedom to operate** (e.g., results of patent searches).
- Ensure there are **no fundamental design problems** in the product/service as assessors will pick up on these.

This is a key section to incorporate academic input to ensure the technical aspects of the project are clearly described to the appropriate level of detail and the innovation is strongly demonstrated. Background and Arising IP should be discussed between all partners.

DEFINITIONS: WHAT IS FREEDOM TO OPERATE?

- Freedom to Operate (FTO) is the legal freedom to market, test or sell a product in a certain area, without legal liabilities to third parties.

- You may have freedom to operate in certain geographical areas, but not others.

- You need to do background checks (e.g., patent searches) to ensure you have FTO.

- Commercial safety depends on having a proper FTO.

- Contact the Technology Transfer team for further guidance **techtransfer@surrey.ac.uk**

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THE POTENTIAL MARKET

Research and describe your addressable market.

Make sure you research your target market, including **speaking to customers and end users,** to demonstrate that you **understand the main market drivers and influences** and have a **robust value proposition.** Ensure the markets you describe are a good match for the identified need. The project should be a genuine response to a market need, rather than a technology that needs to find a market. Assessors will quickly spot a mismatch.

POINTERS

- Describe, **evidence** and **quantify** the size of **target markets** and any **other potential markets.** Size the market from the bottom-up, not top-down.
- Say **how the market is segmented,** and how much of it you can address.
- Describe how your innovation will **change** or **impact** the current **target markets**, including customer segmentation, competitors, trends affecting market growth, and predicted growth rate.
- Evidence that the target market is large enough to justify the grant investment and state who is interested to buy your innovation. Outline your anticipated return on investment. Include recent references to back up your claims.
- Discuss **barriers to market entry** and how you will overcome these. Outline any trends that may affect the markets.
- If the market is large (e.g., global) then break down into smaller chunks and discuss in turn, providing evidence wherever possible (e.g., UK, Europe, Asia).
- Don't forget to summarise any **secondary markets.**

! This is a key question that is often not well addressed. The lead business should spend time on this section to demonstrate that they really know their market and can demonstrate a structured and evidenced understanding of the sector and the opportunity identified.

The market sections should be driven by the lead business. For some projects the academic team may be able to provide links to customers and end users.

OUTCOMES AND ROUTES TO MARKET

Explain and quantify how the business will grow and increase productivity as a result of the project.

It is crucial to describe and **evidence your route to market** and how you will exploit the innovation commercially. State your plan to penetrate target markets. Be specific about how you will achieve your objectives.

POINTERS

- State your **current position** in the market and supply or value chains and **how you will establish or extend your position.** Describe the networks and contacts which will help facilitate your route to market.

- Describe your **target customers** (or end users) **and the value to them** (why would they buy your product?). Demonstrate you have already started to engage with them.

- Explain your **route to market** and how you are going to make **profit.** Quantify realistic **increased revenues or cost reductions.**

- Say **how you will grow the business and increase productivity,** in the short and long-term. **Provide indicative first 5-year figures** to show the return on investment. Be realistic and include price points and market penetration rates. **State the assumptions** behind your estimates.

- Outline **how you will exploit the outputs** such as through know-how, patenting, designs or changes to the business model.

- Describe your strategy for targeting secondary markets. Describe your **plans to disseminate the research outputs.**

- Include specifics e.g., names of marketing/trade shows, partnerships or brokers that you will use to help you reach your target market.

This is a key question that is often not well addressed. The lead business should spend time on this section to demonstrate that they really know their route to market and have a clear exploitation plan.

DEFINITIONS:
WHAT IS THE ROUTE TO MARKET?

The route to market is the strategy of the lead business that determines which distribution channels they will use to deliver the product to their target customers. This is key to achieving the business objectives and accelerating growth in the target market.

- It is the route that stands between you and the group you want to sell to (target customers). You want to bring the right product, at the right time, to the right place.

- Consider who is going to buy your product/service. Remember to think of who will buy the product on behalf of others as well as those who will buy it themselves.

- Think about the places where you can sell/distribute your product/service. This is where your target customer visits. For example, specific websites, trade shows, brick and mortar shops etc.

- Think of real-world ideas as well as virtual.

- You need to consider receptivity. In each location, will the target customer be receptive to buying it? What is your value proposition?

- Primary routes: Wholesalers, catalogues/brochures, online channels, in person contact. Consider multiple options (depending on budget).

DEFINITIONS: WHAT IS AN EXPLOITATION PLAN?

An exploitation plan must be led by the business and should confirm the business case for the project, the overall project plan, and the partners' capability to develop and exploit the project. It should:

- Detail the activities and timescales for exploitation, including the activities to develop the market-buy in.
- List the dissemination activities during the project.
- Enable changes in the commercial environment to be monitored and accounted for.
- Help ensure that adequate resources are committed to exploitation.
- Enable exploitation to be monitored by the key stakeholders.

The exploitation plan should be a living document that can be updated during the project.

TEAM AND RESOURCES

Build a strong consortium – outline who is in the team and describe their roles.

Describe the **track record and credentials** of each of the project partners and explain what each is bringing to the project. Use this to demonstrate that you can deliver the project, gain traction in the market and exploit the project outcomes. Ensure the team has the right blend of **commercial and technical ability,** as well as access to key resources. Teams should usually be a combination of industry and academia, ideally with some **connection to the end user.**

POINTERS

- Describe any current relationships between the project partners to demonstrate your experience in working together, and how this project will further strengthen the partnership.
- Outline the team management approach. State **how the team will work,** including who will report to whom. Outline the role, skills and relevant experience for each person.
- For open roles, state how recruitment will operate. You must ensure **equality, diversity and inclusion,** both in the current team and for open roles.
- Explain the **resources, equipment and facilities** that you will need for the project and how you will access them.
- Avoid heavy reliance on subcontractors. Use of subcontractors must be justified e.g., the required skills/resources are not in the team.

Academic input will be needed to describe your specific role on the project and demonstrate how your experience will enable you to fulfill this role to help deliver the project.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Explain how you will manage the project effectively.

Describe each **work package**, including its **total cost**, timescale and deliverables, as well as **who is responsible** for the work package. Ensure **milestones** are clear, and that **deliverables** are **specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely**. The overall project outcomes should be clear throughout the application. Outline the overall project management techniques/tools that you will employ.

POINTERS

- Include a comprehensive **Gantt chart** in the application appendix.
- Ensure the planned work aligns to the project outcomes.
- Show the **links and dependencies** between the work packages, as well as the **review/risk control points**.
- Be specific about **commercial milestones** and what you will do when you reach each milestone.
- Remember to include details of **exploitation and dissemination** activities.
- Describe your **approach** to project management and any **tools and techniques** you will employ (e.g., agile, scrum, lean, waterfall etc.).
- State who will have overall responsibility for each work package as well as the whole project. Explain the **management reporting lines.**

The academic team should liaise with the Faculty Research & Innovation Office (FRIO) to cost the University input and feed the relevant information into the application. Academic input will be required, in particular to describe the technical details for work package descriptions, and to ensure the Gantt chart is realistic.

RISKS

Show you have considered all potential risks and have the right level of risk.

Some degree of project risk and uncertainty is desirable, but it must be the right type and level of risk. Your risk assessment must **be thorough**. Include a discussion of potential **technical, commercial, managerial, environmental and regulatory risks**. Think widely to cover all risks and be realistic.

POINTERS

- State the **severity and likelihood** of each risk. Suggest sensible **mitigations**, and give the revised severity and likelihood based on this.
- **Assign ownership** of each risk. Be clear on who is involved in the risk management process.
- **Categorise risks** and discuss key risks, don't just signpost the assessor to your risk register.
- Think about **project impacts that are critical to completion** such as resources, expertise and data sets.
- Don't forget to consider the **impacts of a partner not delivering**, including impacts on other parts of project, milestones/deliverables, and the impact of time delays.
- Be specific about your risk management **approach** and how these risks will be **assessed and reassessed** throughout the project.

> The academic team should contribute to this section, thinking broadly about the potential risks, in particular the technical risks.

RISK REGISTER

- Include a comprehensive **risk register** in the appendix;
  below is an example adapted from Innovate UK Good Application Guide.

RISK	PROBABILITY	IMPACT	RATING	MITIGATION	RATING AFTER MITIGATION	OWNER
Give Details	Numerical Score e.g. 1-Low, 2-Med 3-High, Or Red/Amber/ Green	Numerical Score e.g. 1-Low, 2-Med 3-High, Or Red/Amber/ Green	Probability x Impact Score	Give Details	New Probability x Impact Score	Name of person responsible for monitoring

- This is the core of your strategy to assess and control risk.

- Remember to include risk assessments from all risk categories:
  technical; commercial; managerial; environmental and regulatory.

- Don't forget to include commercial risk (e.g. problems with sub-contractors
  or other staff) and environmental risk (e.g. increased pollution). Omitting these is
 a common mistake.

WIDER IMPACTS

Describe the impacts external to the project team - think broadly but be realistic.

Demonstrate that there is potential for **significant positive impact.** Make sure impacts are **realistic,** and **evidence and quantify** them using metrics (e.g., size or value of impacts). Consider **negative impacts** and how they can be mitigated. Remember that reviewers like a balanced view and will spot negative impacts that you have missed. Show how impacts and benefits are aligned with the company strategy and the project exploitation plans.

POINTERS

● Consider the wider impacts of your product/service, including the following: economic; social; environmental; regional; technological; political; legal and health. Say how the impact will be **measured** and give potential **timescales.**

● Measure the **economic impacts** (e.g., increase in productivity, import substitution) to **external parties (including customers), others in the supply chain, wider industry, and UK economy.** Describe and measure expected impacts of the project on **government priorities** and the **local region.**

● Don't forget **social impacts** (e.g., quality of life, social inclusion, jobs, education, public empowerment, health and safety regulations).

ECONOMIC	SOCIAL	ENVIRONMENT	TECHNOLOGICAL
	REGIONAL	HEALTH	POLITICAL	LEGAL
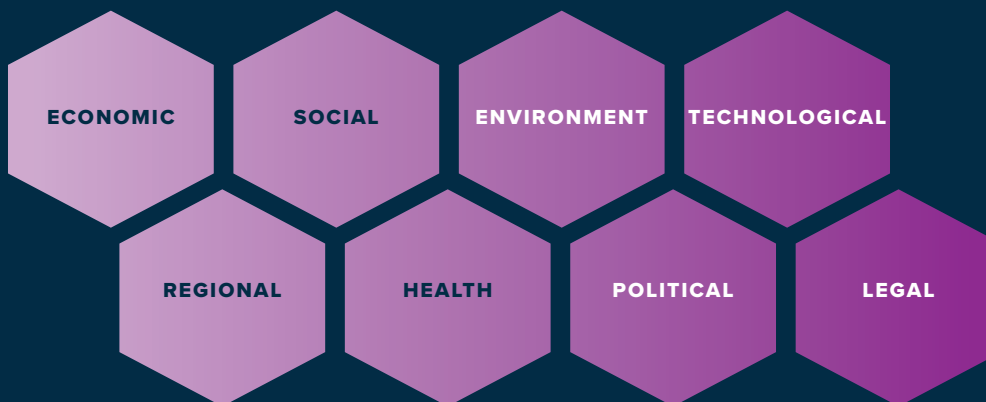
It is beneficial for all project team members to contribute to this section, thinking broadly about the potential wider impacts of the project.

ADDED VALUE AND JUSTIFICATION FOR FUNDING

Demonstrate the positive impact this grant funding will have on the project partners.

Describe the **beneficial effects** that public funding will have on your project and the partners. State the added value of the product/service to the economy/society, including what the funding will enable (e.g. **reducing risk, accelerating routes to market, leveraging wider investment, and enabling partnerships).** The project should deliver value to the UK economy in excess of the whole project cost and demonstrate a good return on investment.

POINTERS

- You must **make the case that Innovate UK funding is absolutely crucial for this project to go ahead** and that **other avenues of funding** (including bank loans, own funds, private investment) are exhausted and/or unfeasible.

- State how the project would progress if you did not secure grant funding.

- Describe the **positive impact** of the project on **each of the partners** involved.

- Refer back to your value proposition to show **what you will bring to the economy** and think broadly about the context that the project sits in (e.g., jobs in the region and national strategies). Study the annual reports and strategy documents of large companies to get ideas on how they describe the added value of technology and the resulting impacts.

- Describe how the project will change the **nature of R&D activity** of the partners (e.g., significant increase in R&D spend during the project and afterwards).

This section should be led by the lead business, with academic input on the positive impact of the proposed project to the University and the change in nature of R&D activity going forward.

VALUE FOR MONEY

Show that your project represents value for money for the team and the taxpayer.

The project must be excellent value for money. Increase added value by including project items that are zero or low cost (for example, a project partner offering something for free). The project costs should be suitable for the project size and complexity.

POINTERS

- Make sure all costs are within the competition rules and the project scope, and ensure that they are sufficient to deliver the project.
- Present **detailed, realistic and justified breakdown of costs** for each project partner (e.g., labour, overheads, materials).
- Demonstrate that you have the **right balance of costs and grant** across the partners and that **time is costed efficiently** (high salaries are not expected in early-stage companies).
- Explain how the partners will **finance their contributions** to the project (e.g., cash reserves or equity investment).
- Justify the **use of sub-contractors** and their costs.
- Demonstrate and quantify **how the project represents value for money** for you, the project partners and where the **return to the taxpayer** will come from (e.g., increased productivity, taxes etc).
- Outline how you will find and resource any post-project activities to enable commercialisation.
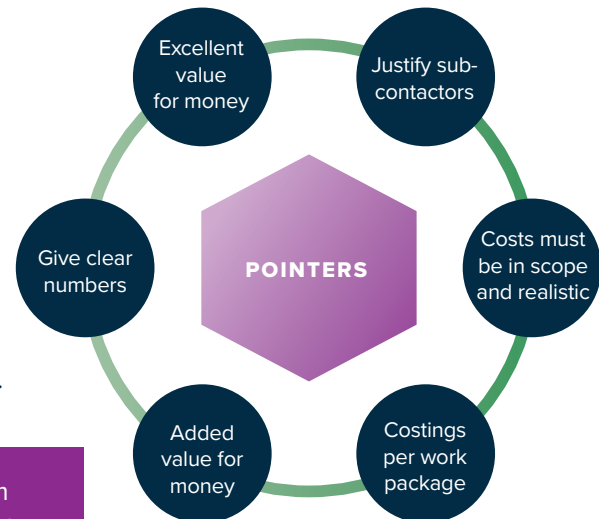
The Faculty Research & Innovation Office (FRIO) team will support you to complete the University costings so that you can help the lead business to present a detailed, realistic and justified breakdown of the University costs as appropriate to the proposed project.

POINTERS

- Excellent value for money
- Justify sub-contactors
- Costs must be in scope and realistic
- Costings per work package
- Added value for money
- Give clear numbers

TALK TO THE SURREY INNOVATION & ENTERPRISE HUB

In addition to the support already outlined in this guide for Innovate UK projects, please contact the Surrey Innovation & Enterprise Hub if you:

- Need a business partner to proceed with your innovation project.

- Would like to discuss innovation project ideas and eligibility.

- Have been approached by a business who is interested in your research and wants to collaborate or hire you as a consultant.

- Are looking for support to facilitate meetings or workshops with business partners.

- Are seeking funding to support a collaboration with industry.

- Need support to scope and develop your innovation funding application e.g. Innovate UK application.

- Would like to find out about Innovate UK Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP) projects.

- Would like someone to visit your School and present a seminar on collaboration with industry, consultancy, Knowledge Transfer Partnerships, Innovate UK or other business-led funding schemes where academics can be partners.

collaborate@surrey.ac.uk

OTHER GUIDES FOR INNOVATORS INCLUDE:

- **Collaborator Guide**
  www.issuu.com/universityofsurrey/docs/collaborator_guide

- **Inventor Guide**
  www.issuu.com/universityofsurrey/docs/inventor_guide

- **Protocol on Student Intellectual Property**
  www.surrey.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-12/student-protocol-guide.pdf

Top tips guides include:

- **How to collaborate with SMEs**
  www.issuu.com/universityofsurrey/docs/how_to_find_an_sme

- **How to write a successful Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP) Project application**
  www.issuu.com/universityofsurrey/docs/top_tip_guides_-_ktp

- **How to successfully scope, deliver and manage your consultancy project**
  www.surrey.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2025-11/Consultancy-Top-Tip-Guide.pdf

collaborate@surrey.ac.uk

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