DICE Network+ Flexible Fund Call

Feasibility Studies

V1 May 2025

DICE Network+

The Digital Innovation and Circular Economy (DICE) Network+ will realise a transformative shift in the sustainability and circularity of digital and communication technologies.

Leveraging the power of the digital revolution, the network will drive a circular economy across sectors and value chains. By adopting a network of networks approach, harnessing interdisciplinary collaboration, research, and technological innovation, our network will be a beacon for change, inspiring and guiding industries, governments, and communities towards a digitally enabled sustainable and circular economy. See website for more detail.

Engaging teams from the Universities of Exeter, Sheffield, Salford, Swansea, Southampton, Surrey, Nottingham, Queens University Belfast, and the Open University, the project will run from January 2025 to December 2027. In addition, the Network+ is launched with a wide reach of **industry partners** (including Ellen MacArthur Foundation, AMRC, Digital Catapult, British Computer Society, SAP, BASF, Wabtec, eBay, BSI), **leading UKRI-funded projects** (including Faraday Institution, Royce Institute, NICER Programme, Pro2 and Connected Everything Networks) and **government partners** (DESNZ, Defra, DSIT).

Funding Opportunities:

One of the key opportunities within the DICE Network+ is flexible funding to accelerate wider research into specific challenge areas at the interfaces of digital technologies and circular economy. This funding consists of £450,000 at 80% full Economic Cost (FEC) as detailed below.

This call covers the Knowledge Exchange Placements and first round of the Feasibility Studies.

Fund	Total funding available (80% fEC)	Maximum funding per project (80% fEC)	Expected number of projects	Application schedule
Knowledge Exchange Placements	£50,000	£5,000	10	Open May 2025, rolling application
Feasibility Studies	£300,000	£50,000	6	First round open May 2025 Second round open Feb 2026 (if required)
Demonstrator Studies	£100,000	£50,000	2	Open Feb 2026

Feasibility Study Funding:

The total funding available for this Feasibility Study call is £300,000. Feasibility Studies will be awarded

- at 80% full Economic Cost (fEC).
- to a maximum award value of **£50,000 per project.**
- with total project value not exceeding £62,500.

Approach:

The DICE Network+ has an ambitious approach with a desire to create impact and meaningful change within the sector. This Feasibility Study Call provides the opportunity to undertake speculative and potentially high-impact research to accelerate innovative solutions that promote the adoption of a digitally enabled circular economy.

Areas of focus:

We are seeking studies that are innovative, evidence based, applied and appreciate the need for a whole system approach. The feasibility study should result in increased confidence in the proof of concept developed, which then has potential to attract further prioritisation and investment in the area. Applications should include or be led by an early career academic and should involve at least one industrial or government partner to ensure real world application and impact.

The DICE Network+ is simultaneously addressing two interrelated challenge areas. Applications are welcomed that align to these, with areas of interest having been identified as below:

Embed: Embedding sustainability and circularity within the design of digital and communication technologies. Example projects could include, but are not limited to:

- How to embed circular innovation within UK semi-conductor component manufacturing, aligning to the National Semiconductor Strategy (2023).
- Circular design and development of digital and communication technologies, incorporating sustainable materials, modular architectures, and strategies for product life extension and end-of-life recovery.
- The application of circular approaches to digital infrastructure, such as safer energy storage systems, retrofitting for the ICT sector and the potential role of robotics and automation.
- Circular system design to address the environmental footprint of AI, exploring the concept of data as a manufactured product.

Enable: Realising the potential of the digital revolution, including advances in digital processes, to enable a circular economy. Example projects could include, but are not limited to:

- Utilising digital advances to support the delivery of nature-based solutions, addressing regeneration and biodiversity challenges.
- Applying advances in AI and Machine Learning to accelerate the adoption of circular innovation within one or more industrial sectors.
- The application of digital technology to accelerate the widescale adoption of Product as a Service (PaaS) models, including Digital Product Passports.
- Exploring the socio-technical aspect of new circular digital system adoption.
- Addressing Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) in the circular digital revolution, ensuring a socially beneficial transition to an inclusive future model.

Application of funds:

The sum awarded can include both directly incurred and directly allocated costs, covering investigator/ researcher time, travel and subsistence appropriate to delivery of the project, and consumables.

The duration of each individual project can be between 6 and 9 months from date of award. It is expected that all projects funded in this call will be completed by 30 October 2026 and be fully invoiced by 30 November 2026. No extensions beyond this date will be possible.

As the grant holder, University of Exeter is responsible for allocating funding to successful proposals and will reimburse the lead institution at 80% fEC. The lead institution must be willing to provide the remaining 20% fEC. Applications where a portion of the project costs are met by industry funding are also welcomed. Lead institutions will be required to itemise bills based on 100% fEC and then invoice at 80% fEC.

The lead institution will be accountable for the conduct of the research, the use of public funds and for ensuring the proper financial management of grants in accordance with UKRI terms.

Key dates:

Date	Action
20 May 2025	Call goes live: Public Announcement
1.30pm 10 July 2025	Webinar for interested parties
Midday 8 September 2025	Deadline for submissions
30 September 2025	Invitations to Panel Pitch Day issued. Unsuccessful proposals are advised of the final decisions
14 October 2025	Panel Pitch Day
21 October 2025	Applicants notified of Panel Pitch outcomes
22 October – 20 December 2025	Completion of contracting process
5 January 2026	Feasibility Studies start
(TBC) January 2026	Feasibility Study kick off meeting
30 October 2026	Feasibility Study last date for completion
20 November 2026	Last date for submission of final reporting
30 November 2026	Last date for submission of final invoicing

Application process:

The deadline for submissions is **Midday 8 September 2025**. Applications received after this deadline will not be accepted.

The application process will consist of two stages. Awards will be made via a short, written application of two parts, followed up by a pitch to a multidisciplinary panel including representatives from industry and UKRI.

Feasibility study applications should be submitted using the application form provided, via email to Georgie Hopkins at DICE-network@exeter.ac.uk by midday on Monday 8 September 2025. The application form is accessible on the DICE Network+ website when the call goes live on Tuesday 20 May 2025.

Eligibility criteria:

- Funding is available to higher education institutions, research council institutes and independent research organisations in the UK that are normally eligible for UKRI funding. Full guidelines can be found here.
- We welcome applications from investigators who work on a part-time basis.
- We are keen to support applications from early career researchers.
- We encourage collaboration across organisations where it will be beneficial to the delivery of a project; where two or more organisations are participating, a single application should be submitted via the Principal Investigator's institution, and they will be responsible for the disbursement of funds to third parties.
- Subcontracting is allowed, although we would not expect to fund proposals where more than 40% of the award is subcontracted.
- Standard UKRI eligibility rules apply.
- Post-Doctoral Research Associates who are involved in developing an application and who are to be engaged in the research can be named as a 'Researcher Co-Investigator' in applications.
- Individuals may submit or be named on more than one application.
- Matched funding and collaboration with industry, policy and third sector organisations or other programmes is permitted. Partnership be it financial or in-kind with industry is encouraged. Project Partners will not receive funding directly from the award but will play a role in the proposed research. They will be separate institutions to those submitting the proposal. Named Project Partners must be UK based. An organisation should only be named as a Project Partner if it is providing specific contributions (either in cash or kind) to the project. Any partners should be from an organisation with a research and/or innovation base. There is no limit to the number of Project Partners. A letter of support should be supplied from all project partners confirming:
  o The organisation's role in and commitment to the proposed project and explain how it will contribute to the impact of the project.
  o The value of any cash in-kind contributions.

- Any financial or other interests with any project partners named in the application must be disclosed to ensure integrity of research.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion:

The DICE Network+ understands that excellence will be achieved through recognising the value of every individual. We want to encourage, support and respect ideas from everyone and ensure our inclusive activities are representative of the diverse circular economy community. Our ambition is to instil these values across all our activities, and we wish to support a diverse cohort of participants. As such, we welcome applications from diverse and underrepresented groups and encourage applicants to discuss any specific requirements that will enable participation - please contact the DICE Network+ Manager, Georgie Hopkins, by email DICE_Network@exeter.ac.uk.

The principles of EDI will be adhered to across the Fund, specific measures include:

- Assessment panel composition will be considered with the aim of maintaining EDI.
- All assessment panel members are encouraged to have undertaken equality and diversity training prior to appointment.
- The application process has been designed to minimise any potential impact of bias in decision making:
  - The short, written application form consists of two parts allowing the project idea to be reviewed separately to identifying information.
  - The application review process follows a two-stage process against pre-defined criteria.
- Applicants will be invited to complete a voluntary EDI questionnaire. This confidential information will enable DICE Network+ to review funding activities for diversity amongst protected characteristics (as identified in the Equality Act 2010)

Responsible Innovation:

Responsible Innovation is a process that takes the wider impacts of research and innovation into account. It aims to ensure that unintended negative impacts are avoided, that barriers to dissemination, adoption and diffusion of research and innovation are reduced, and that the positive societal and economic benefits of research and innovation are fully realised. The DICE Network+ wants to ensure that any research it funds is undertaken with the values of Responsible Innovation in mind. In this case, we expect researchers involved in funded feasibility studies to anticipate, reflect and engage on the wider ethical and societal impacts, implications and value of their work, entering into dialogue with the public and other stakeholders where appropriate, and respecting the views of others.

Evaluation process

The evaluation process will follow the proposed best practice for promoting EDI in research and funding as presented in this reflective paper.

Applications will be assessed by a panel made up of delegates from the DICE Network+ Academic Team and Advisory Group following the process detailed below (and Figure 1).

Pre-Application: DICE Network+ team are available to provide advice and guidance. An open access webinar provides an overview of the application process with opportunity for Q&A. The webinar recording is made available online for future reference.
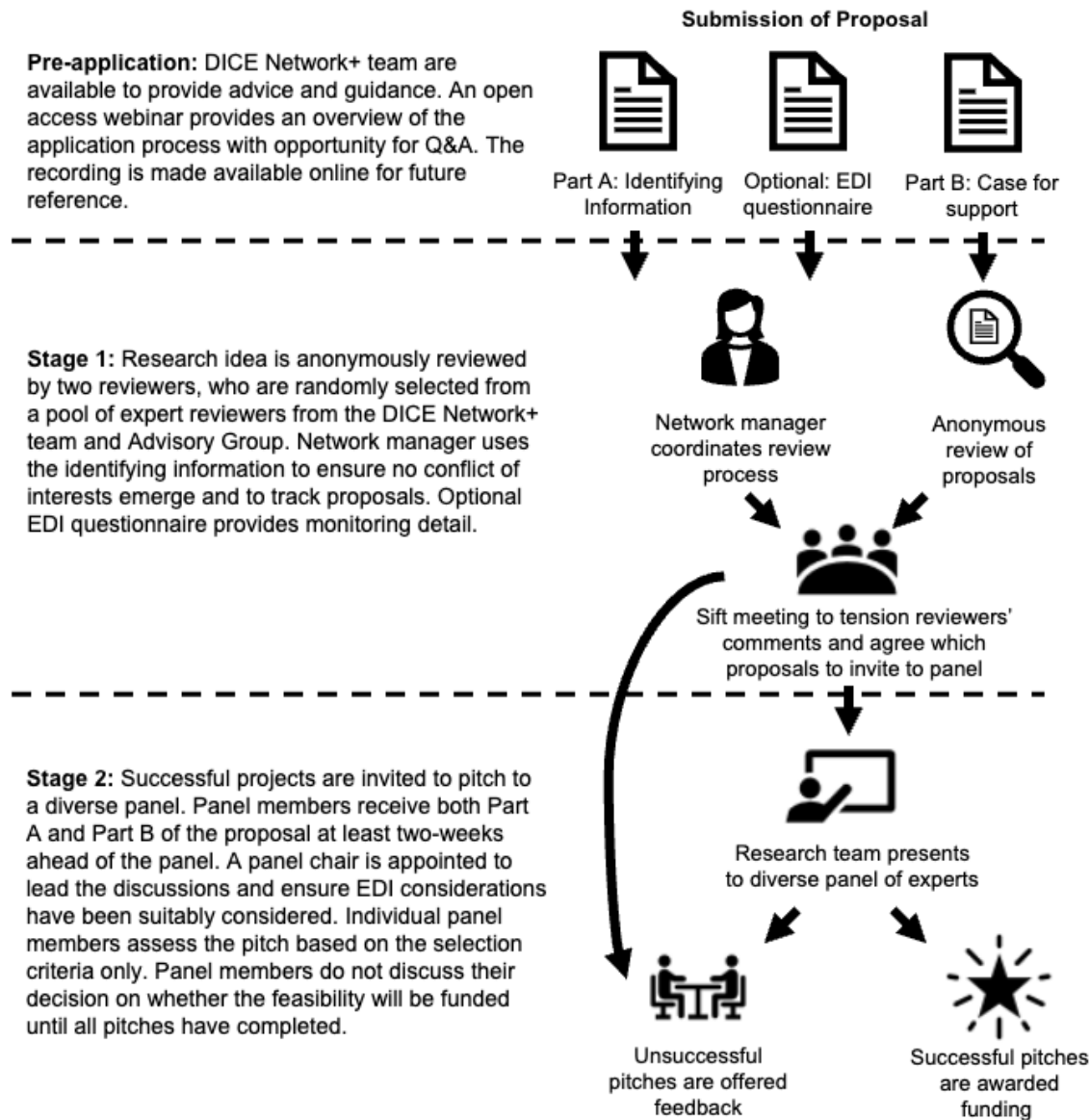
Stage 1: An initial screening will be undertaken by the DICE Network+ Manager to check:
- Applications meet the essential criteria and eligibility requirements.
- Applicants have submitted all the required materials.
- Any declared conflicts of interest prior to circulation to the assessors and to consider any additional potential conflicts of interest before allocation of proposals to assessors.

Research idea is anonymously reviewed by two reviewers, who are randomly selected from a pool of expert reviewers from the DICE Network+ team and Advisory Group. Network manager uses the identifying information to ensure no conflict of interests emerge and to track proposals. Optional EDI questionnaire provides monitoring detail.

Stage 2: Successful projects are invited to pitch to a diverse panel. Panel members receive both Part A and Part B of the proposal at least two-weeks ahead of the panel. A panel chair is appointed to lead the discussions and ensure EDI considerations have been suitably considered. Individual panel members assess the pitch based on the selection criteria only. Panel members do not discuss their decision on whether the feasibility will be funded until all pitches have completed.

Figure 1: the Evaluation Process

Submission of Proposal

Pre-application: DICE Network+ team are available to provide advice and guidance. An open access webinar provides an overview of the application process with opportunity for Q&A. The recording is made available online for future reference.

Part A: Identifying Information

Optional: EDI questionnaire

Part B: Case for support

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Network manager coordinates review process

Anonymous review of proposals

Sift meeting to tension reviewers' comments and agree which proposals to invite to panel

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Research team presents to diverse panel of experts

Unsuccessful pitches are offered feedback

Successful pitches are awarded funding

Further information

If you require any further information or have any questions regarding this funding call, please contact the DICE Network+ Manager, Georgie Hopkins, by email DICE_Network@exeter.ac.uk