



APEX Fellowship Programme

2019 Call 2 -Application Guidelines

Please read this document CAREFULLY before submitting your application

History of Changes			
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Call 2 Important dates*

Application Deadline	9 th April 2019
Peer Review	April/May 2019
Interviews	June 2019
Fellowships to be awarded	July 2019

* Please note these dates are indicative and subject to change

1. The APEX Programme

APEX (APC Postdoctoral EXcellence) is an innovative, intersectoral and trans-disciplinary training, career development and mobility programme based at APC Microbiome Ireland, which focuses on the research area of the gut microbiota and its role in human health and disease. Research at the APC aligns closely with Ireland's Smart Specialisation Strategy, particularly in the strategic priority areas of diagnostics, food for health, and sustainable food production and processing, with significant potential for societal and economic impact in these areas.

The aim of APEX is to develop the next generation of scientific leaders who will gain hands on experience developing cross-disciplinary and entrepreneurial skills through individual research projects with a mandatory intersectoral (industry) secondment during their two years of fellowship. Fellows can freely select the research theme, supervisor and host institution. APEX is designed to have maximum impact on the fellows, the host institutions and the hosts' industry partners through innovative and translational training and research. While developing human capital, APEX will facilitate collaboration between academia and industry within and outside of the region, which will benefit from access to excellent researchers, key enabling research infrastructure and knowledge transfer. APEX will cultivate enterprise focused researchers to meet industry challenges and support innovation along the Technology Readiness Levels (TRL) to bring societal and economic benefit to Ireland and Europe. Furthermore, APEX (via the Fellows) aims to improve the perception of science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) as a career to school children as well as increase the level of awareness of their impact on society.

1.1 About APC Microbiome Ireland

APC Microbiome Ireland (APC), founded in 2003 and coordinated by University College Cork (UCC), investigates the role of gut microbiota in human health and disease. APC's mission is to 'Link Irish science with industry and society through excellence in research, education and outreach in gastrointestinal health' and it has been funded to the value of €100 million since its foundation by competitively won grants and industry collaborations. The 320+ researchers of the APC focus on active international research collaborations across the boundaries of traditional research sectors, fostering a lively trans-disciplinary environment with clinicians, clinician-scientists and basic scientists from diverse backgrounds working in teams, sharing ideas and resources. The scale and scope of APC's research on the microbiome - one of the hottest topics in biology - is of relevance to all branches of human medicine and veterinary science, as well as to the economic welfare and health of society. A particular strength of the APC is its significant intersectoral partnership. The institute has secured more than €30 million from industry collaborations since 2003 and, on the basis of these collaborations and the excellence of the research it carries out, has been backed by the Irish funding agency Science

Foundation Ireland (SFI) in excess of €65 million. The APC currently comprises 3 academic partners: UCC and its associated teaching hospitals Cork University Hospital and the Mercy University Hospital, Teagasc Moorepark Food Research Centre (a government funded agri-food research organisation) and Cork Institute of Technology (CIT). The Institute is further amplified by over 25 research collaborations with industry partners across the food, pharma, biotech, animal and diagnostics sectors. Research carried out at the APC aligns closely with the Ireland's Smart Specialisation Strategy, RIS3, particularly in the priority areas of diagnostics, food for health, sustainable and food production and processing.

1.2 Fellowship Programme

The APEX programme will offer 20 prestigious two-year fellowships for incoming mobility across two calls over the 60 months duration of the programme. Fellowships will be targeted towards experienced researchers (ERs). All fellows will be hosted in an APC academic host organisation (UCC or Teagasc) and will be required to complete a mandatory secondment in a relevant industry host. The secondment will be 3 to 6 months in duration and can be a single period or split into short stays.

1.3 APEX Research Themes

Fellowships will be offered in the four core APC research areas of 'Microbes to Molecules', 'Diet and Microbes at the Extremes of Life', 'Brain-Gut-Microbiota Axis' and 'Host-Microbe Dialogue'. Adhering to the COFUND principle of 'individual-driven mobility', APEX applicants will have the freedom to choose their research topic (within the remit of the APC), their supervisor and their secondment organisation.

1.4 APEX Academic Supervisors

Prior to creating an application, you must contact an APEX supervisor to discuss your proposal and to gain support for your application. Whilst you can choose your individual research project, your topic must be aligned with the broad research themes of APEX and with the research interests of your prospective supervisor. Please see website for list of participating academic supervisors. [APEX Supervisors](#)

1.5 Mandatory Industrial Secondment

Secondments must be relevant to the fellow's research project and to his/her career development. This will be as outlined in the fellow's personal Professional Development Plan (PDP; an integral element of the APEX training and development programme). Industry Partners of the institute will host fellows during the mandatory secondment periods and will contribute to industry relevant training. The secondment duration will be between three and six months, and secondments may be undertaken in a single period or split into shorter periods. The fellow, with advice from their supervisor and the APC's Commercialisation team, will need to secure a Letter of Commitment from a suitable industry host within 6 months of starting his/her fellowship.

2. Fellowship Details

2.1 General information

APC APEX Fellowships are open to experienced researchers of any nationality, resident anywhere in the world (provided the mobility eligibility criteria are met), seeking a prestigious career development fellowship in research of the gut microbiota and their role in human health and disease. All fellows will be hosted in an APC academic host organisation (University College Cork or Teagasc Moorepark) and will be required to complete a mandatory secondment in a relevant industry host. The APEX programme will provide excellent experienced researchers with a research, complementary, and transferable skills training opportunity of highest international standards that will help them to advance their scientific careers within a chosen sector, across academia, industry or the public sector. APEX Fellowships provide an opportunity to work closely with academic and non-academic partners of the applicant's choice, suited to their research, training and career development needs. Applicants choose their research area (within the remit of APC), APEX supervisor, and secondment organisation in the non-academic sector.

2.2 Duration of the Fellowship

The APEX programme will offer incoming fellowships across two calls over the duration of the programme.

The total duration of each fellowship is two years.

2.3 Eligibility Criteria

To be considered eligible, applicants must fulfil the following eligibility criteria:

- a. Applicants may be of **any nationality**
- b. Applicants must be **fluent in English** (written and spoken)
- c. Applicants to APEX Programme must be **Experienced Researchers**
 - An experienced researcher must at the application call deadline (Call 2: 9th April 2019) be in possession of a doctoral degree or have at least four years of full-time equivalent research experience in academia or industry.
 - Full-Time Equivalent Research Experience is measured from the date when a researcher obtained the degree entitling him or her to embark on a doctorate, either in the country in which the degree was obtained or in the country in which the researcher is recruited, even if a doctorate was never started or envisaged.
- d. **Mobility Rule:** Researchers may not have resided or carried out their main activity (work, studies, etc.) in the country of the Host institution (i.e. Republic of Ireland) for more than twelve (12) months in the three (3) years immediately before the call deadline. Time spent as part of a procedure for obtaining refugee status under the Geneva Convention, compulsory national service and/or short stays such as holidays are not taken into account.
- e. A relaxed mobility rule will be used to encourage applications falling into the 'Career Restart' or 'Reintegration' fellow's category.

- The eligibility considerations for the ‘Career Restart’ category is that the applicant must have undertaken a career break in research (i.e. must not have been active in research for at least 12 months immediately prior to the call deadline. Being active in research is determined on the basis of fellowships or employment contracts in the domain of research. Applicants may not have resided or carried out their main activity in the Republic of Ireland for more than 3 years in the 5 years immediately prior to the call deadline.
 - The eligibility considerations for the ‘Reintegration’ category is that the applicant must be a national or long-term resident of an EU Member State or Associated Country. (An associated country means a third country which is party to an international agreement with the Union). The applicants may not have resided or carried out their main activity in the Republic of Ireland for more than 3 years in the 5 years immediately prior to the call deadline.
- f. Applicants must be able to carry out **full time research** during the fellowship period (parental leave, sick leave, military leave and care leave are accepted).
- g. **Project Eligibility:** Proposals must describe a research project to be implemented during a 2-year period, adhere to the programmes ethical standards, include a secondment in the non-academic sector, and the topic must fall within the broad APC research themes.
- h. **Ethics Issues:** APEX will comply fully with the H2020 ethics policy, including those in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU and the European Convention on Human Rights and its supplementary protocols. APEX will not fund 1) research activities aiming at human cloning for reproductive purposes, 2) research activity intended to modify the genetics of human beings that could make such changes heritable (with the exception of research relating to cancer treatment of the gonads), 3) research activities intended to create human embryos solely for the purpose of research or for the purpose of stem cell procurement, including by means of somatic cell nuclear transfer. Applicants must complete an Ethics Issues Table (Application form. Part A: No. 4 Ethics Issues Table). If ethical issues arise, he/she needs to complete and submit the ‘Ethics Self-assessment’ document. Applicants should refer to the H2020 guidance on Ethics Self- assessment.
http://apc.ucc.ie/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/h2020_hi_ethics-self-assess_en.pdf.
Applicants must provide any documentation available at the time of proposal submission. For documents that are not yet available, applicants must explain how they will obtain these documents and provide an approximate timeline for submission. All applications for which ethical issues are flagged will be reviewed by the *Programme Ethical Review Committee* (PERC), who will check whether ethical issues apply to the proposed project, and whether the issues have been adequately addressed by the applicant. The PERC may declare the proposal ineligible, eligible as presented or may ask for additional information and then take a decision.
- i. **Secondment Eligibility:** Secondments must be 3 to 6 months in duration and can be a single period or split into short stays. Eligible secondment hosts are research performing, non-academic organisations located anywhere in the world. The proposed academic supervisor and programme manager will assist applicants to secure a high-quality secondment host. Secondments must be relevant to the fellow’s project and career

development as outlined in his/her personal Professional Development Plan (PDP). A mandatory letter of commitment from the secondment host must be obtained within 6 months of starting his/her fellowship.

- j. **Supervisor Eligibility:** Applicants must have two supervisors: a main academic supervisor and a secondment supervisor (non-academic sector). All supervisors must align with the principles and requirements of the European “Charter and Code” for Researchers and have proven expertise in the research area. Any supervisor with less than five years’ experience in the supervision of postdoctoral researchers will be required to complete mentoring training prior to appointment of the fellow. Each applicant must identify and contact a relevant eligible supervisor in advance of submission.

3. Proposal Preparation and Application Process

3.1 Publication of the Fellowship Call

The application process starts with the publication of the call for proposals. Call 2 opens January 2019. All Call 2 application templates will be found on the APEX website.

3.2 Preparation of the Application

- Applicants are encouraged to start the process of preparing their application as early as possible.
- Applicants must complete the **Expression of Interest** form [EoI](#) and email to the programme manager APEX@ucc.ie
- Once you have identified the research area you are interested in, identify a host supervisor that best meets your research area of interest. Contact the supervisor with your project idea. All supervisors are listed on the APEX website. You should work with the supervisor to develop your project proposal. During the application stage, the APEX host supervisor will help you to identify an appropriate secondment organisation and supervisor in the non-academic sector.

3.3 Application Documents

Applicants must assign their research proposal to one of the following research areas, as described under the APEX research themes:

- Microbes to Molecules
- Diet and Microbes at the Extremes of Life
- Brain-Gut-Microbiota Axis
- Host-Microbe Dialogue

A complete application consists of:

Part A:

1. General Information: Administrative information on the applicant, project, academic supervisor and host institution.
2. Abstract: Applicants must indicate: a project thematic area, up to 5 keywords, and provide a 2000-character proposal summary.
3. Evidence of eligibility for the APEX programme (details on qualifications, evidence of compliance with the programme's mobility requirements and references).
4. Ethics issues table.

Part B:

- Project proposal (max. 10 pages).

Part C:

- Applicant's CV (max. 5 pages).

Part D:

- Ethics Self-Assessment.
Applicants, who in "Part A – Administrative Information" indicate that ethical issues are associated with their research, are required to provide additional information and documentation. Applicants must present an explanation based on H2020 self-assessment guide and provide all pertinent documentation. If documentation is not ready to be presented, the applicant should explain how and when it will be obtained. Please refer to Horizon 2020 Guidance on Ethic Self-Assessment.
http://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/grants_manual/hi/ethics/h2020_hi_ethics-self-assess_en.pdf

Other documents required:

- Letters of commitment from the academic supervisors.
- Letter of commitment from secondment host. A mandatory letter of commitment from the secondment host must be obtained within 6 months of starting his/her fellowship.

Proposals must respect the following minimum standards: • a minimum font size of 11 points, except for the Gantt chart and tables where the minimum font size is 8 points • single line spacing • A4 page size • margins (top, bottom, left, right) of at least 15 mm (not including any footers or headers) • a clearly readable font (e.g. Arial or Times New Roman). Literature references should be placed as footnotes at the bottom of the page in which they are mentioned, in font 8 or 9. They also count toward the page limit.

3.4 Submission of the Application

Applications must be submitted in **PDF format**, to the APEX email address APEX@ucc.ie with the **subject heading "Call 2"** on or before the deadline of 9th April 2019. The application system will close at 13:00 (Dublin time) on the deadline of 9th April 2019. Applications cannot be accepted after this date.

Applicants will receive acknowledgement of receipt of the submitted proposal.

- All applications must be complete and in English.

- All applications must have confirmed support of the proposed academic supervisor (letter of commitment from the academic supervisor).
- One application per call may be submitted. However, unsuccessful applications will be encouraged for resubmission at future calls.
- The Call 2 application document templates must be used.
- Researchers at risk, who might not be able to submit an application in the aforementioned manner, should contact the APEX programme manager APEX@ucc.ie to discuss an alternative submission arrangement.

UCC encourages the submission of applications well in advance of the closing date for the competition.

3.5 Researchers at risk

The Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions (MSCA) enable displaced researchers moving to Europe to continue their careers through the provision of funding and support. As a MSCA programme, APEX will support applications from researchers who are at risk or who are displaced by conflict, or whose situation makes it difficult for them to pursue their research careers. Support will be provided on a case by case basis, both during the application process and during the fellowship programme.

Available support may include:

- Application submission by post where online application requirements may discriminate against the researcher's circumstances.
- Application of the eligibility criteria appropriately to ensure researchers who have suspended their activities whilst seeking refugee status are not disadvantaged.

For applicants who applied for or who are applying for refugee status in Ireland, the time spent in that process will not count as time resident in Ireland.

4. The Selection Process

The selection process will follow open, transparent and merit-based procedures in order to ensure that applications are evaluated in a competent and impartial manner. Standard evaluation criteria and scoring system will be employed by all reviewers and by all interview panels.

4.1 Evaluation and scoring system

Three evaluation criteria will be used: Excellence, Impact and Implementation. Such criteria will be employed both during the international peer review and during the interview stages. The evaluation criteria along with their respective sub-criteria are set out in Table 1.

4.2 Selection Process Stages

The process will be comprised of six stages, including an international peer review and an interview stage.

Stage 1: Eligibility Check

Immediately after the closing date of the call, the proposals will be checked for eligibility. All applicants will receive feedback on whether their application is progressing to the next stages. Where an application is found to be ineligible, the candidate will receive an explanation for its ineligibility.

Stage 2: Ethics Check

All applications for which ethical issues are flagged will be reviewed by the Programme Ethical Review Committee who will check whether ethical issues apply to the proposed project, and whether the issues have been adequately addressed by the applicant. The ethics committee may declare the proposal ineligible, eligible as presented or may ask for additional information and then take a decision. Proposals with ethical clearance will proceed to the next stage of the evaluation process. Proposals without ethical clearance will be declared ineligible. All applicants will be informed on the eligibility status of themselves and/or their proposal following the completion of stage 1 and 2.

Stage 3: International Peer Review

Each application will be reviewed remotely by three members of the International Peer Review Panel. Reviewers will be allocated based on a good match between the topic of the proposal and the expertise of the reviewer. Each reviewer will review the proposal and score it against the evaluation criteria and scoring as outlined in Table 1 & 2. Reviewers will indicate their scores together with comments on strengths and weaknesses of the application for each evaluation criterion. This stage will end with a remote meeting of the three reviewers where they will discuss their individual scores and agree the application's final score. In situations where there are extreme differences in scores, a fourth expert reviewer will be appointed by the programme manager and programme coordinator to read the proposal and a consensus reached with the agreement of all four reviewers.

Stage 4: Ranking of applications

The international peer review stage will end with a remote panel meeting where the international peer review will discuss the average allocated scores of all reviews and agree the ranking list of applicants. The ranking list will include all eligible proposals with ethical clearance, in descending order of scores. A set of weightings (Table 3) will be applied to the score awarded by the reviewers following their remote consensus meeting. The final weighted score will be used to rank the applications. All applicants regardless of whether they are progressing to the interview stage, will receive information and feedback.

Stage 5: Interview

The top scoring candidates will be invited to the next phase, a competency interview by an Interview Panel. All the criteria in Table 1 will apply for the interview stage. Each invited candidate will be interviewed by an interview panel of three members. The interview panel will consist of a member of the APC management staff (Chair), an APC principal/ funded investigator who is not linked to the applicant and/or proposed project and a representative from the Irish MSCA office or a representative of a funding agency (e.g. SFI/Enterprise Ireland). A University HR representative together with the programme manager will also sit in on the interviews. All interviews will be conducted in English and will last up to 30 minutes.

Applicants will be asked to prepare a short 10-minute (power point) presentation on his/her proposal, including an overview of the scientific project, the career development and training objectives and the impact of the project. The presentation will be followed by questions from the interview panel, relating to the proposal, but also to items such as the motivation of the candidate. Interviews will be held face-to-face or through video conferencing or Skype. (It is the candidate's responsibility to avail of a PC with a Skype account or video conferencing facilities). The final mark for each candidate will be comprised of the score for the written proposal (50% weighting) and the interview (50% weighting).

Stage 6: Final funding decision

Following the interview, the interview panel will reach consensus on a score between 0 (very poor) and 5 (excellent) for all aspects of the interview using the same evaluation criteria, scoring and threshold as the international peer review (Tables 1, 2 and 3). Post interview, the average, weighted score for the peer review process and the consensus score from the interview will be added up. The final mark for the applicant will therefore be composed equally from the evaluation of the written proposal (50%) and the interview (50%). The top 10 scoring candidates will be presented to the APEX Steering Committee who will endorse the final funding decision based on International Peer Review Panel and Interview Panel recommendations. The next 5 applicants will be placed on a reserve list. All applicants will receive feedback at this stage. All feedback will be by email. Applicants on the reserve list will be informed that they have been placed on this list. If an applicant declines their offer, an applicant on the reserve list may be informed that their proposal will be funded. All offers of fellowship will be subject to reference checks.

The number of proposals that will ultimately be funded will depend on the available budget for each research theme.

Table 1: Evaluation criteria for the APEX fellowship programme.

Excellence	Impact	Implementation
Quality, innovative aspects and credibility of the research (including inter/multidisciplinary, gender aspects)	Enhancing research- and innovation-related human resources, skills, and working conditions to realise the potential of individuals and to provide new career perspectives across the multi-disciplinary areas of APC research strengths and interests	Overall coherence and effectiveness of the work plan, including appropriateness of the allocation of tasks and resources
Clarity and quality of transfer of knowledge/training for the development of the researcher in light of the research objectives and planned secondments	Effectiveness of the proposed measures for communication and results dissemination to APC stakeholders, including academic and industry collaborators and communities, the public, patient groups etc.	Appropriateness of the management structures and procedures, including quality management and risk management
Quality of the supervision, hosting arrangements		Appropriateness of the institutional environment (infrastructure)
Capacity of the researcher to reach or reinforce a position of professional maturity in research	Increasing the number of young researchers with skills, including innovative research, transferable & entrepreneurial skills, and mobility experience to be the scientific leaders of tomorrow in Microbiome research	Competencies, experience & complementarity of the secondment host & its commitment

Table 2. Scoring system to be applied to the APEX evaluation criterion

Score	Description
0	Proposal fails to address the criterion or cannot be assessed owing to missing or incomplete information.
1	Poor. The criterion is inadequately addressed, or there are serious inherent weaknesses
2	Fair. Proposal broadly addresses the criterion, but there are significant weaknesses.
3	Good. Proposal addresses the criterion well, but a number of shortcomings are present.
4	Very Good. Proposal addresses the criterion well, but a small number of shortcomings are present.
5	Excellent. Proposal successfully addresses all relevant aspects of the criterion. Any shortcomings are minor.

Table 3. APEX Fellowship scores and priority weighting

	Excellence	Impact	Implementation
Weighting of scores	50%	30%	20%
Priority	1	2	3
Overall Threshold of 70% Applied to Total Weighted Score			

5. Redress Procedure

All candidates have a right to a redress procedure. Applicants wishing to start the redress procedure should contact the programme manager within 30 days of receipt of the evaluation results for procedure information. Redress requests can only be made about procedural issues or perceived incorrect application of eligibility criteria, and not with regard to the scientific judgments of the reviewers and interview panel members. The requests must be sent by email to APEX@ucc.ie. The redress form will be available on the APEX website. Redress requests will be examined by a Redress Committee who will either reject or accept the request; in the latter case, a new remote peer review with ethics check and/interview will be arranged. Applicants will be informed of the results of redress within 30 days from their request. Decisions from the redress committee are binding.

6. Offer of Fellowship

Applicants will be offered an employment contract by one of the APC hosting institutions in the APEX programme. This offer will be subject to reference checks. The applicant will be required to accept the offer in writing, within 7 days.

It is expected that successful Fellows will start the Fellowship in October 2019.

6.1 Funding

The APEX fellowship salary will consist of the following components: living allowance, mobility allowance and family allowance (if applicable) (Table 4).

Salaries received by the fellow will be liable for taxes and/or other deductions. Information on Irish taxation can be found at the Office of Revenue Commissioners website [Revenue](http://www.revenue.ie).

Table 4. APEX Fellowship Salary

	Gross Salary/month
*Fellow with family	€3,522
Fellow without family	€3,071

*paid when the Fellow has family obligations. Family is defined as persons linked to the Fellow (i) by marriage; (ii) a relationship with equivalent status to a marriage recognised by the legislation of the country where this relationship was formalised; (iii) dependent children who are being maintained by the Fellow.

There will also be a contribution to research costs (€10,000/annum) to cover consumable costs.

7. Support Services

7.1 APEX Helpdesk

The APEX Programme Manager will run a support helpdesk for applicants and fellows throughout the duration of the programme, via email APEX@ucc.ie and phone (+353 (0) 21 4901393).

Helpdesk support will include provision of information on:

- the application
- eligibility criteria
- the submission procedure
- suitability of a research topic (whether it fits within the remit of APC)

7.2 Hosting Agreement (Researcher Visa Scheme)

Ireland is a signatory of the Hosting Agreement (researcher visa scheme). This scheme offers a free and fast track service for visa applications for higher education institutions and the private sector, who wish to recruit non-EU researchers to the country. Under the scheme visas

are issued rapidly and work permits are not required. Researcher's families can accompany them immediately and use public schooling. Family members have access to the job market and the researchers can stay on to look for a job after their contract ends. The scheme is operated by the EURAXESS Ireland office and is supported by the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation.

7.3 Useful Links

- <https://www.euraxess.ie/>
- http://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/grants_manual/hi/ethics/h2020_0_hi_ethics-self-assess_en.pdf

8. Contact Details

Address: APEX Programme Manager, APC Microbiome Ireland, Rm 5.04, 5th Floor, Biosciences Building, UCC, Ireland.

Email: APEX@ucc.ie

Telephone: +353 (0) 21 4901393

Website: <http://apc.ucc.ie/apex/>