

Call for Proposals

## Helmholtz Excellence Networks

Joint efforts to strengthen Germany as a research site  
Funding from the Helmholtz Association's Initiative and Networking Fund

20.12.2023

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# 1 Funding context and objectives

The Excellence Strategy of the federal and state governments aims to strengthen Germany's position as a research site in international competition in a long term. It supports the development of university profiles and cooperation in the science system and has already given an enormous boost to the German research landscape in recent years. The success of the predecessor program - the Excellence Initiative - proves that the opportunities for developing internationally visible top sites in research can be exploited particularly well if partner institutions from non-university research are also contribute to the developments.

By funding Helmholtz Excellence Networks, the Helmholtz research portfolio and particular strengths of the Association are to be strategically integrated into Clusters of Excellence. This will enable additional synergies to be realized in new joint topics and a greater, sustainable impact in their implementation. The Helmholtz Association has already successfully promoted the further development of collaboration with universities through cooperation with 25 clusters of the Excellence Strategy with its own resources since 2019.

Building on this experience, this call for proposals gives all Helmholtz Centers participating in applications for new Clusters of Excellence of the universities the opportunity to apply for seed funding from the Initiative and Networking Fund (IVF) for this strategic partnership. Both the participating Helmholtz Centers and the university partners should benefit from the Helmholtz Excellence Networks by:

- Complementary expertise in the application and initial phase of the Clusters of Excellence comes together in Helmholtz Excellence Networks, critical mass and specific synergies are created for working on new research topics of strategic relevance (relation of the Cluster of Excellence to the Helmholtz Research Agenda).
- In addition to funding from the German Research Foundation (DFG) - which implements the Cluster of Excellence program on behalf of the federal and state governments - additional synergies and a higher impact of the Cluster of Excellence can be generated.
- The new strategic partnership creates a common framework and more opportunities for recruiting and promoting young talent.
- Creating a joint use of infrastructure and networking in the (transfer) ecosystem, which generates additional system solutions benefits and added value for both parties along the knowledge and innovation chain or in research on large-scale infrastructures.
- Improving the image of promising research sites (regional and supra-regional)

The funding of this call relates to the full proposal phase (2024/25) and the first two years of DFG funding for the Cluster of Excellence (2026/27).

## 2 Funding approach

The IVF funding increases the chance that Helmholtz Centers will actively participate as partners in the development of new Clusters of Excellence. As a result, research clusters are created that develop double impact through the interaction of a university and a Helmholtz component and make a valuable contribution to the development of the respective science sites. In particular, Helmholtz Centers should be able to contribute their specific strengths - such as excellent basic research and systems analysis with translation into application-oriented aspects and research on large-scale infrastructures.

The funding options are limited to cases that meet the following requirements:

- It is a joint preparation and establishment of a new Cluster of Excellence and not a renewal proposal by the partner university.
- The topic of the Cluster of Excellence must have a proven relation to the research topics of the Helmholtz Association and have a long-term development perspective that is strategically aligned with the Helmholtz research portfolio.
- Topics that are already adequately covered by the Helmholtz Association's programs with basic funding (PoF) will not be considered for funding if it can be assumed that the funding will not generate any further added value for the Helmholtz Association.
- Also excluded are all research activities whose funding results in so-called double funding, particularly because the activity is also funded by the DFG.

Thus, funding for Helmholtz Excellence Networks from the Initiative and Networking Fund (IVF) is therefore a complementary funding option to the DFG's Excellence Strategy. The funding of the Helmholtz Excellence Networks differs from the DFG funding line for Clusters of Excellence (according to the DFG's call for proposals of 15.12.2022) primarily in terms of the target group: While the focus there is on universities, only Helmholtz Centers can apply for funding from the IVF for this call. The funding objects of the Helmholtz Excellence Networks relate exclusively to the funding purposes described above.

### 3 Funding purpose

The Helmholtz Excellence Networks budget (IVF funds and own funds) will be used to initiate and sustain key activities within the framework of the newly proposed Clusters of Excellence, in particular the joint full proposals and bridging activities of the Helmholtz Centers with the universities. The funding is intended to open up support opportunities that can be used for one or more of the following purposes, depending on the needs of the Cluster of Excellence:

- Seed funding to work on innovative or risky research topics and issues.
- Funding is open in terms of topic, but includes a verifiable link to the Helmholtz research and infrastructure portfolio, and funding is temporary (project funding).
- Earlier appointments in strategic fields of the participating partner institutions.
- Joint recruitment to strengthen the partnership between the Helmholtz Center and the university(ies) in the Cluster of Excellence (e.g. tandem group at postdoc level, joint junior research groups, transfer tandems).
- Procurement and establishment of Excellence Cluster-specific equipment and lab facilities.
- Establishing central platforms (e.g. for the coordination of transfer activities) as well as excellence cluster-specific measures for the use and integration of research infrastructures and large-scale equipment.
- Personnel and material resources for office and coordination infrastructure to support the application process and to initiate key activities between the partners.

### 4 Target group

The call for proposals is aimed at consortia of scientists from the Helmholtz Association who:

- are cooperation partners of universities applying for a new Cluster of Excellence or
- who participate as Principal Investigator (PI) in new Cluster of Excellence applications from universities.

Only research centers of the Helmholtz Association are eligible to apply. GSI is only eligible to apply via the Helmholtz Institutes in Jena and Mainz.

## 5 Object and scope of funding

Funding is provided for activities within the scope of the full application (phase 1) and the initial phase (phase 2) of new clusters of excellence at universities with the participation and cooperation of the Helmholtz Center. Funding from the Initiative and Networking Fund (IVF) is made available to the Helmholtz Center submitting the application. The funding can be forwarded by the Helmholtz Center to the partner university. The following also applies to the use of IVF funds:

- Personnel, material resources (materials, consumables, travel costs) and investments, including for equipment and depreciation, can be financed.
- Only the direct costs of preparing the application and implementing the Cluster of Excellence project on the part of the Helmholtz Center and the partner university are eligible for funding.
- The funding applied for must be matched by the applicant Helmholtz Center's or university's own funds in the same amount (using direct costs). Overhead costs cannot be used as matching funds.
- The grants are awarded as fixed-amount funding (Festbetragsfinanzierung) and paid out to the relevant Helmholtz Center in contractually agreed annual installments.

### 5.1 Phase 1: Supporting the full application 02/2024 - 12/2025

Object of funding: Personnel and material resources to coordinate the cooperation, initial joint activities if necessary (e.g. workshops, exchange formats of the partners of the proposed Cluster of Excellence).

Scope of funding per application: max. €100 thousand for max. 23 months, from February 2024 to December 2025

### 5.2 Phase 2: Collaboration with the Cluster 2026/27

Object of funding: Personnel, material resources and investments to realize synergies of cluster cooperation - e.g. for earlier appointments, equipment for new recruits, equipment purchases, seed funding for new groups, platforms on infrastructures (see paragraph 3 purpose of funding).

Scope of funding per application: max. €250 thousand per year for max. 24 months, from January 2026 to December 2027.

## 6 Application and approval procedure

The application and approval process is synchronized with the DFG's selection and funding decisions for the new Clusters of Excellence (see 6.3 Timetable). All applicants are qualified for funding of the Helmholtz Excellence Networks by the IVF without further scientific review by the Helmholtz Association if the DFG votes in favor of the respective (proposal for the) Cluster of Excellence and the IVF funding criteria are met.

### 6.1 Application deadlines

- Until **15.03.2024** (inclusive): Applications to **support the full application (phase 1)**. Phase 1 applications can be submitted from February 2024 with retroactive effect from 01.02.2024.

- Until **31.07.2025** (inclusive): Applications for funding for the **initial phase of the Cluster of Excellence (Phase 2)**. Applications for phase 2 can be submitted from June 2025, funding will begin from 01.01.2026.

The submission deadline is a cut-off deadline. Applications received after the above-mentioned date cannot be considered. The timely upload of the digital application via the ProMeta project management platform is decisive for meeting the deadline.

## 6.2 Application templates and submission of applications via ProMeta

The templates provided for download on the IVF project management platform ProMeta must be used to prepare the applications for Phase 1 and Phase 2. The application template (Annex 1) for Phase 1 is already available for download at [www.helmholtz.de/ausschreibungen](http://www.helmholtz.de/ausschreibungen).

Applications must be written in English. The application for the Helmholtz Excellence Networks must clearly state which activities and tasks are to be implemented and financed by which partner or principal investigator. A written confirmation of the provision of own funds by a board member of the applicant Helmholtz Center must be attached to the application and integrated into the PDF document of the application. To ensure that the application is legally binding, the confirmation of the provision of the center management's own funds must be signed with an advanced or qualified electronic signature. If this is not possible, the signed original must be submitted by post in addition to the upload via ProMeta. In this case, please send the original of the cover letter to: Helmholtz Association of German Research Centers e.V., Ahrstraße 45, 53175 Bonn.

Applications must be submitted electronically via ProMeta. Applications must be submitted in the form of a PDF document (including attachments) by the applying Helmholtz Center (project spokesperson, project coordinator, third-party funding administration) within the deadline.

At <https://ivf.helmholtz.de/> you can create an account via self-registration in order to submit the application forms. After login with the user name assigned by the platform and the password you have created, you will be taken to the overview page with the current calls for proposals and can enter the master data and upload the required documents and files using the "Submit application" button. Self-registration of applicants is possible from the activation of the call for proposals. The submission masks for the applications will be activated for phase 1 on **01.02.2024** and for phase 2 on **01.06.2025**.

### By submitting a proposal for a Helmholtz Excellence Networks Phase 2:

- Applicants are asked to include a brief description of the project in German and English (250-400 words each) when uploading the documents to ProMeta, Please prepare a short description in advance and have it available for the application submission.
- Applicants agree to disclose the funding objects and activities (e.g. in differentiation from the proposed DFG cluster funding and the PoF) for a formal check under the funding law. The application documents for phase 2 will be made available to the DFG to exclude double funding. IVF Controlling will also ensure that double funding is avoided in the use of funds.

### Checking applications for eligibility (formal criteria check)

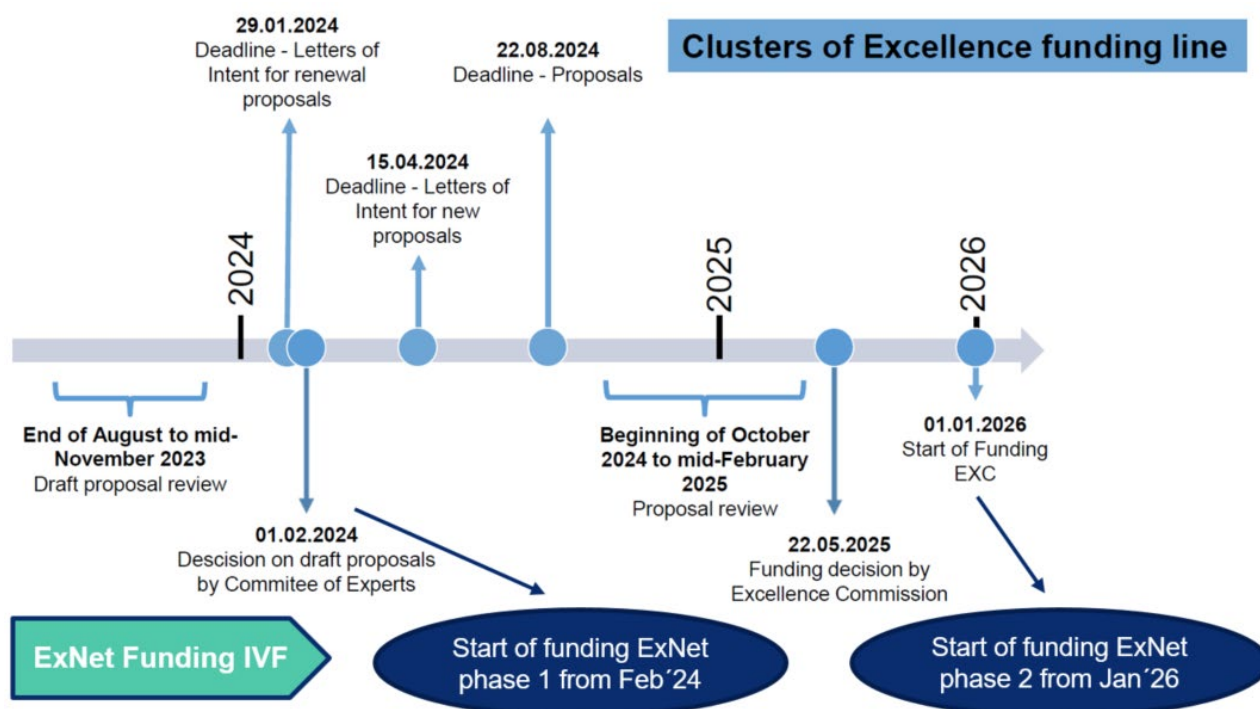
Applications will be evaluated according to the following **formal criteria**:

1. Confirmation by Helmholtz scientists or a Principal Investigator (PI) of the Cluster of Excellence that the applicant Helmholtz Center is a partner of a new Cluster of Excellence proposal of the cooperating university (copy of the cover sheet of the draft proposal for the DFG Cluster of Excellence or letter from the university that the Helmholtz Center is involved as a cooperation partner or PI of the Cluster of Excellence proposal).
2. Conformity with the funding objectives of the call for proposals and the object of funding specified therein.

3. Description and plausibility of the requested activities and use of funds according to the application template (Annex 1).
4. Eligibility of the financial resources applied for.
5. Explicit commitment by the center or other partners to co-finance the requested IVF funding from their own resources.

The applying Helmholtz Center will be informed promptly in writing of the result of the formal criteria check of the application and the approval of funding for the Helmholtz Excellence Networks.

## 6.3 Timetable



## 6.4 Contact and advice

The contact person for the call at the Helmholtz Head Office is Andreas Schulze, Strategy/ Initiative and Networking Fund (e-mail: [andreas.schulze@helmholtz.de](mailto:andreas.schulze@helmholtz.de)).

If you have any questions about using ProMeta, please contact Christina Angersbach from the Helmholtz office by e-mail ([christina.angersbach@helmholtz.de](mailto:christina.angersbach@helmholtz.de)).