

CALL FOR APPLICATIONS

As of December 16, 2025 for up to 10

**Helmholtz Investigator Groups
(Standard Track) & Helmholtz Innovation
Exploration Groups (Pilot Track)**

Funded by the Initiative and Networking Fund (INF) of the
President of the Helmholtz Association

Table of Contents

I.	Objectives of the program	2
II.	Target group, eligibility and funding recipient.....	2
III.	Type, scope and amount of funding	4
IV.	Application	5
A)	Selection criteria	5
B)	Selection process	5
C)	Dates and deadlines	7
D)	Contact persons	7
E)	Application documents	7
V.	Funding phase.....	11
A)	Funding decision and contract.....	11
B)	Mandatory leadership training in the Helmholtz Leadership Academy.....	11
C)	Reporting	11
D)	Evaluation of the Helmholtz Investigator Group and innovation progress assessment of the Helmholtz Innovation Exploration Group	11
E)	Open science publication	12
F)	Extension of the funding period	12

I. Objectives of the program

Standard Track

The Helmholtz Investigator Groups program aims to win the best international and national recognised researchers (2 to 6 years of academic age) for a first leadership position in science. It offers Helmholtz Investigator Group leaders the opportunity to establish their own independent research group at a Helmholtz Center in cooperation with a partner university. As an Investigator Group leader, they can access the research infrastructure, grow to their full potential as a leader in science as well as strengthen and further develop their networks in the scientific community.

The focus of the group must be of relevance to a [Helmholtz research program](#). Investigator Group leaders collaborate closely with a partner university to establish research cooperation in areas of joint interest. In particular, the cooperation with the partner university allows them to gain experience in teaching and PhD supervision. Further qualification entails a structured leadership training at the Helmholtz Leadership Academy. As a consequence of a positive evaluation, Investigator Group leaders are granted a permanent position at the Helmholtz Center.

Pilot Track

The Helmholtz Association introduces a new pilot track designed to support outstanding postdoctoral researchers who seek to develop the earliest scientific foundations required for future application, industry cooperation or spin-off creation. The track focuses on the (pre-)validation phase in which first scientific results, technical hypotheses and prototypes are built to a level that enables credible pitching to venture capital or industrial partners. This phase precedes market-oriented activities supported by other Helmholtz transfer programs such as Helmholtz Enterprise.

The program provides up to five years of funding to build a small, research-driven team that explores, matures and strengthens breakthrough ideas with societal or commercial potential. The emphasis lies on scientific depth, robustness and clarity of direction, while the applicants are also supported in developing the entrepreneurial and translational skills needed for later business development.

The program does not aim for the immediate preparation of a business plan. Instead, it enables researchers to generate early scientific evidence, refine the technological concept, and build the competencies necessary to position the idea for subsequent innovation funding, industry collaboration or a future spin-off.

II. Target group, eligibility and funding recipient

The Helmholtz Association aims to win **outstanding postdoctoral researchers** to establish their own Investigator Group or Innovation Exploration Group at a Helmholtz Center. Helmholtz looks for candidates who have demonstrated **exceptional scientific excellence** and show the **potential to take up a leadership position in science**. Women scientists are particularly encouraged to apply.

The following **eligibility criterion** applies for both tracks:

- **The outstanding researchers are at maximum six years of academic age¹.** Academic age is calculated as years after receiving the doctoral degree, deducting times due to the following reasons (for fictional examples please see FAQ):
 - For maternity leave / parental leave of the parent who gave birth, the track record considered will be extended by 18 months (or if longer by the amount of leave actually taken until the call deadline) for each child born after the PhD award. For parental leave of the parent who has not given birth, the track record considered can be extended by the amount of parental leave actually taken until the call deadline for each child born after the PhD award. Parental leave times include periods of part-time work (no more than 25 % paid work), in which the researcher took over the main share of family work.
 - If the researcher was seriously ill for an extended period of time (i.e., more than 90 days), was caring full-time for a family member in need, or had other personal hardships (e.g., fleeing or seeking asylum) that prevented the researcher from continuing his or her research, these periods of unavoidable downtime may also be included in the track record.
 - Likewise, times of clinical training after the award of a PhD can be considered up to a maximum of four years.
 - The same standards go for times of full-time employment in the industry, which can be considered up to a maximum of four years.

Please indicate the date of your PhD award in the application (see Application Annex AA3). If you wish to have periods of parental leave, care leave or unavoidable downtime credited, please indicate the reasons and accordingly times in the application. This information is voluntary and will not be disclosed to persons involved in the assessment process. A documentation of such times is only necessary upon request. However, the date of the PhD award is a mandatory information.

In addition, the following **eligibility criteria** apply:

Standard Track

- **The outstanding researchers are at least two years of academic age.**
- **International research experience.** Candidates need to have international research experience (i.e. staying outside of Germany) for at least six continuous months during their doctoral or postdoctoral phase. Exceptions can be made for outstanding researchers for whom international mobility may be plausibly challenging due to care responsibilities or personal hardships.
- **Recruitment of external talents.** The Helmholtz Investigator Groups program is a recruiting instrument with a strong emphasis to gain external talents for Helmholtz. For

¹ The Helmholtz Association is strongly committed to become a more inclusive environment, in which persons with different backgrounds and at different stages of their lives can thrive. In 2020, the Helmholtz Association has adopted the [Helmholtz Guideline on Diversity and Inclusion](#), which describes diversity and inclusion as a key strategic commitment. To initiate systemic change, the Helmholtz Association adopts changes in its funding schemes by focusing on academic age.

internal candidates, exceptions can only be made for outstanding researchers who have been employed at a Helmholtz Center for less than one year at the time of the application deadline.

If a Helmholtz Center would like to nominate a candidate who does not fulfil these requirements, it should contact the Helmholtz Association head office in advance to discuss the case.

Pilot Track

- **The outstanding researchers have completed their PhD.** Applicants can apply immediately after completing their doctorate (i.e., 0-6 years of academic age). Stays abroad are not a prerequisite for admission. Furthermore, there are no restrictions regarding the length of time candidates have previously worked at the Helmholtz Center.

The **recipient of the funding** in the standard track and the pilot track is the **hosting Helmholtz Center**.

III. Type, scope and amount of funding

Funding will be granted for up to ten Helmholtz Investigator or Innovation Exploration Groups working in the research fields of Energy, Earth and Environment, Health, Information, Matter, and Aeronautics, Space, and Transport. The funding provided by the Initiative and Networking Fund (INF) amounts to 200,000 Euros maximum per annum. The Helmholtz Center (and the partners if applicable) are expected to provide co-funding with an equivalent of 150,000 Euros minimum. Thus, **Investigator Groups or Innovation Exploration Groups receive a minimum of 350,000 Euros a year for a five-year period.**

Standard Track

The funding covers the group leader position (normally at E14/15 TVöD / collective agreement for civil service employees) as well as the recruitment of scientific and/or technical staff. Investigator Groups generally include doctoral researchers, whose scientific supervision is carried out by the group leader, alongside postdoctoral researchers, engineers or technical specialists. In total, groups typically consist of three to four team members. In addition, the funding may be used for materials, travel and necessary investments to implement the research project.

Pilot Track

The funding covers the group leader position as well as the recruitment of scientific and/or technical staff. As a rule, Innovation Exploration Groups consist of postdoctoral researchers, engineers, technical specialists or other highly qualified staff. To protect early-career researchers and ensure high-quality outcomes, doctoral candidates may be included only in exceptional, well-justified cases. Applicants must convincingly explain how the doctoral project can be successfully carried out within the specific context of an Innovation Exploration Group, including supervision arrangements, scientific independence and risk mitigation for the completion of the degree. In addition, the funding may be used for materials, travel and necessary investments to implement the research project.

IV. Application

A) Selection criteria

The most important selection criteria are:

Standard Track

- **Outstanding scientific achievements and research experience of the applicant**, as reflected in the CV, publications, awards and other scientific contributions.
- **Quality of the planned research project**, including innovation capacity, scientific relevance, structure, coherence and feasibility.
- **Leadership qualities and the ability to supervise inter-/national and diverse doctoral researchers**, appropriate to the scope of the planned Investigator Group.
- **Synergy effects resulting from cooperation between the Helmholtz Center and the partner university**, as well as further cooperation partners, if applicable.
- In the selection meeting, the candidate's ability to **present the essence of their research in a concise manner and to convincingly defend their ideas** will also play a role.

Pilot Track

- **Scientific excellence of the applicant and demonstrated ability to independently drive a scientific idea**, including independent conceptual, methodological or technical contributions beyond the doctoral project, assessed relative to their career stage.
- **Quality, credibility and early-stage maturity of the scientific concept**, providing a plausible and robust foundation for future application, industry cooperation or potential spin-off creation.
- **Transformative innovation potential of the underlying idea**, i.e., its capacity to enable future commercialization, deep-tech development or other forms of societal or economic value creation.
- **Entrepreneurial motivation and development potential** of the applicant, reflected in their willingness to engage in technology transfer, entrepreneurship or industry collaboration.
- **Feasibility and structure of the proposed five-year plan**, including appropriately defined milestones, team composition and risk management for an early exploratory phase.
- **Fit with the hosting Helmholtz Center**, i.e., the alignment of the project with the strategic profile, research environment and infrastructure of the hosting Center, including credible access to relevant facilities, platforms, technological environments and, where applicable, transfer and commercialization support.

B) Selection process

The application process involves the following main stages:

1. **Application at the Helmholtz Center.** Candidates first apply directly to the Helmholtz Center they wish to join as a group leader. Each Center conducts its own internal pre-selection process. Candidates should contact the Center's representatives listed in Call Annex CA1 in

advance to obtain information on the Center-specific timeline and procedure for this internal pre-selection.

2. **Pre-selection and nomination by the Helmholtz Center.** Each Helmholtz Center conducts a transparent pre-selection process, which is documented in the Center's selection statistics (Application Annex AA7). After completing the pre-selection, the Center nominates the most promising candidates and invites them to submit their complete application documents.

The Helmholtz Center must submit a binding advance notification to the Helmholtz head office by **March 6, 2026**, indicating the planned applications (see Application Annex AA1) via ProMeta.

3. **Submission of complete applications.** The heads of the Helmholtz Centers submit the complete applications to the Helmholtz head office via the project management platform ProMeta by **May 4, 2026**.

The maximum number of candidates that each Helmholtz Center can nominate is as follows:

no more than 4 applications:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Deutsches Zentrum für Luft- und Raumfahrt DLR ▪ Forschungszentrum Jülich FZJ ▪ Karlsruher Institut für Technologie KIT
no more than 3 applications:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Alfred-Wegener-Institut Helmholtz-Zentrum für Polar- und Meeresforschung AWI ▪ Deutsches Elektronen-Synchrotron DESY ▪ Deutsches Krebsforschungszentrum DKFZ ▪ Helmholtz-Zentrum München – Deutsches Forschungszentrum für Gesundheit und Umwelt HMGU ▪ Helmholtz-Zentrum Berlin für Materialien und Energie HZB ▪ Helmholtz-Zentrum Dresden-Rossendorf HZDR
no more than 2 applications:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Deutsches Zentrum für Neurodegenerative Erkrankungen DZNE ▪ GEOMAR Helmholtz-Zentrum für Ozeanforschung Kiel ▪ Helmholtz-Zentrum Potsdam – Deutsches Geoforschungszentrum GFZ ▪ GSI Helmholtz-Zentrum für Schwerionenforschung² ▪ Helmholtz-Zentrum Hereon ▪ Helmholtz-Zentrum für Infektionsforschung HZI ▪ Helmholtz-Zentrum für Informationssicherheit CISPA ▪ Max-Delbrück-Centrum für Molekulare Medizin in der Helmholtz Gemeinschaft MDC ▪ Helmholtz-Zentrum für Umweltforschung UFZ

² The GSI is eligible to apply only via Helmholtz Institute Jena and Mainz.

4. **Formal criteria check.** After submission, the applications undergo a formal criteria check. Incomplete documents or violations of the formal eligibility requirements will lead to exclusion from the selection process.
5. **Selection meetings.** All candidates present their proposals to one of several interdisciplinary panels of international experts. The panels review the applications and presentations, and formulate funding recommendations based on their evaluations. The final funding decisions follow the overall outcome of the panel assessments.
6. **Start of funding.** Successful candidates must start their Helmholtz Investigator or Innovation Exploration Group within nine months after receiving the funding approval, otherwise, the funding will expire.

C) Dates and deadlines

- **Candidates:** Please contact the Helmholtz Center to obtain the exact deadline for the internal selection process.
- **March 6, 2026:** Deadline for binding preliminary applications submitted by the Helmholtz Centers via the project management platform ProMeta
- **May 4, 2026:** Deadline for submission of complete application documents by the Helmholtz Centers via the project management platform ProMeta
- **June / July 2026:** Selection meetings (exact dates to be announced)
- **No more than nine months after funding approval:** Start of the Helmholtz Investigator or Innovation Exploration Group

D) Contact persons

A list of contact persons at the Helmholtz Centers is available in Call Annex CA1. For any general questions regarding the call, please contact: Anna Tschaut anna.tschaut@helmholtz.de +49 30 206 329-18

E) Application documents

Only complete applications will be considered. **Applications can only be submitted by the nominating Helmholtz Center.** The complete application documents (with the exception of the career development plan and evaluation concept as well as the university statement) must be submitted via the **project management platform ProMeta by May 4, 2026 (cut-off date)**. All application documents must be submitted in English as PDF files. File names are generated automatically upon upload.

1. Advance notice of planned applications (Application Annex AA1)
2. Application (research proposal + attachments incl. AA2; as one file)
3. General data (AA3)
4. Confirmation of terms of agreement (AA4-ST / AA4-PT)
5. Statement on AI use in the proposal preparation (AA5)
6. Data consent (AA6)
7. Selection statistics (AA7)
8. Financial plan (ProMeta, cf. AA2)
9. Career development plan and evaluation concept (AA8-ST / AA8-PT)
10. University statement (AA9-ST)

Advance notice of planned applications (Application Annex AA1)

Use Application Annex AA1 to make a binding pre-registration for the submission of full applications.

Application

Standard Track

Please submit the following documents in one PDF file:

- Research proposal (no more than 20 pages incl. references, Arial 10 pt.):
 - **A description of the scientific aims of the Helmholtz Investigator Group**, demonstrating the relevance of the project to the research discipline(s) and outlining how the proposed research contributes to the respective Helmholtz program.
 - **A timeline with clearly defined work packages and milestones**, describing the structure, planned progression and feasibility of the project.
 - **A concept of cooperation with the Helmholtz Center and the partner university**, as well as further cooperation partners if applicable, highlighting the strategic significance³ and mutual benefits of the planned collaboration and explaining how the project aligns with the research focus of the partner university or department.
 - **An approach to recruiting members for the group and building an effective, diverse team**, including measures to foster an inclusive and supportive research environment.

Additional documents:

- **Financial plan.** Please attach the financial plan created based on the template (see Application Annex AA2) directly to the proposal and explain the cost items as requested there.

³ If the strategic relevance is integrated in the description of the research aims, a short reference to the relevant paragraphs is sufficient.

- **CV** (no more than 3 pages, Arial 10 pt.; incl. supervision experiences)
- **List of publications, awards, and patents** (if applicable)

Pilot Track

Please submit the following documents in one PDF file:

- **Research proposal** (no more than 20 pages incl. references, Arial 10 pt.):
 - **A description of the research aims of the Helmholtz Innovation Exploration Group**, demonstrating the relevance of the project to the research discipline(s) and outlining how these aims form the basis for a potential future application or value creation.
 - **Application potential**. A concise description of the intended application field or use-case hypothesis, expected value, which problem it may solve, and how Helmholtz infrastructure supports the concept.
 - **Independent scientific contribution beyond the doctoral thesis**. A brief explanation of the applicant's independent scientific contributions that go beyond the doctoral project (e.g., conceptual, methodological or technical developments, project responsibility, interdisciplinary work).
 - **A timeline with clearly defined work packages, milestones, go/no-go points, and an outline of major risks and risk-mitigation strategies**, appropriate to the early-stage nature of the project.
 - **A concept of cooperation with the Helmholtz Center and, where applicable, partnering research institutions, transfer offices, industry partners or innovation ecosystems**, highlighting the strategic significance and mutual benefits of these collaborations, as well as describing the fit to the respective Helmholtz program and the focus of relevant partners.
 - **An approach to recruiting members for the group and building an effective, diverse team**, including justification in case the team includes doctoral candidates (which is only possible in exceptional and well-justified cases).

Additional documents:

- **Financial plan**. Please attach the financial plan created based on the template (see Application Annex AA2) directly to the proposal and explain the cost items as requested there.
- **CV** (no more than 3 pages, Arial 10 pt.)
- **List of publications, awards, and patents** (if applicable)

General data (Application Annex AA3)

Please provide the general data requested in Application Annex AA3.

Terms of agreement / Hosting Commitment (Application Annex AA4-ST / AA4-PT)

Use Application Annex AA4-ST to confirm the terms of agreement and AA4-PT to confirm the commitment of the hosting Center respectively.

Statement on AI use in the proposal preparation (Application Annex AA5)

Use Application Annex AA5 to provide a brief statement on whether and how AI tools were used during the preparation of the proposal.

Data consent (Application Annex AA6)

Use Application Annex AA6 to consent to our data policy which is presented in our data protection information (see Call Annex CA2).

Selection statistics (Application Annex AA7)

The Helmholtz Center should use Application Annex AA7 to describe the pre-selection process and Center statistics.

Financial plan (ProMeta and Application Annex AA2)

Use the form provided in ProMeta to fill in the prospective finances of the group. Ensure that the financial planning in ProMeta does not differ from the financial planning in the attachment to the research proposal (AA2).

Career development plan and evaluation concept (Application Annex AA8-ST / AA8-PT)

Standard Track

- Use Application Annex AA8-ST_a for the career development plan for the group leader
- Use Application Annex AA8-ST_b to describe the evaluation concept

Pilot Track

- Use Application Annex AA8-PT for the career development plan for the group leader. The plan may include elements such as entrepreneurship training or innovation-focused mentoring to support the scientific, entrepreneurial and translational development of the group leader.

General note:

Additional documents providing further detail on the career development plan or, in the Standard Track, the evaluation concept may be added. These documents must be combined with the annex into a single PDF file; only one consolidated document should be submitted as Application Annex AA8-ST / AA8-PT.

This annex is **required only after funding has been approved** and before the group officially starts the project. Please send the completed annex to the contact person indicated in this call (anna.tschaut@helmholtz.de).

University statement (Application Annex AA9-ST)

Standard Track

The partner university should be involved in the selection process at an early stage to ensure the smooth integration of the Helmholtz Investigator Group leader into the relevant department and, ideally, prepare a joint appointment as a professor. A Helmholtz Investigator Group can be hosted either solely at a Helmholtz Center or jointly at a Helmholtz Center and the partner university. Please use Application Annex AA9-ST to specify the rights and duties of the candidate at the partner university. The statement should be signed by high-ranking officials (e.g., President, Vice-Chancellor, Dean).

This annex is **required only after funding has been approved** and before the group officially

starts the project. Please send the completed annex to the contact person indicated in this call (anna.tschaut@helmholtz.de).

Please refrain from submitting any additional documents or letters of recommendation (e.g., from supervisors or cooperation partners). Such documents will not be taken into account during the selection process.

V. Funding phase

A) Funding decision and contract

After a positive funding decision, the group leader and the Helmholtz Center will negotiate the definite start date of the group and inform the Helmholtz Association head office about the latter. Afterwards, the contract is issued. Funding is provided based on a grant agreement between the Helmholtz Association and the applying Helmholtz Center.

B) Mandatory leadership training in the Helmholtz Leadership Academy

Group leaders are required to attend the course “Leading Your Group” at the [Helmholtz Leadership Academy](#) in the first or second year of the funding period. The curriculum prepares participants for their new leadership responsibilities and supports them in successfully developing their group. The course fees of approx. €5,900⁴ may be included in the financial plan and covered either wholly or in part by the Centers. In addition, the Helmholtz Centers (and partner universities if applicable) also provide further qualification and career counselling services as specified in the career development plan.

C) Reporting

In each funding year, the group leaders must report on the activities of the group by April 30. Reporting is done via the project management platform ProMeta. Group leaders must submit a final report no later than six months after the end of the funding period.

D) Evaluation of the Helmholtz Investigator Group and innovation progress assessment of the Helmholtz Innovation Exploration Group

Standard Track

The Helmholtz Centers evaluate the Helmholtz Investigator Group and its leader (in consultation with the partner university). A substantial participation of external reviewers is mandatory. The evaluation results will inform the Helmholtz Center’s decision whether the fixed-term contract of the group leader will be changed to a permanent contract, which is the case after unequivocally positive evaluations. The outcome of the evaluation must be sent to the Helmholtz Association head office in an evaluation report at the end of the fourth funding year at the latest.

⁴ The final fee will be announced when registering for the academy.

Pilot Track

Progress will be monitored through innovation progress assessments conducted by external experts at the end of year 2 and year 4, based on the milestones and go/no-go criteria defined in the approved research proposal.

Funding ends either after five years or upon successful company formation, whichever comes first. If the venture pathway proves unfeasible, the track also supports alternative outcomes, including continuation of the scientific career of the group leader within or beyond the Helmholtz Association.

E) Open science publication

By accepting funding from the Initiative and Networking Fund of the Helmholtz Association, group leaders agree to make scientific publications based entirely or in part on the results of the funded project available to everyone in a freely accessible archive (repository) no later than six months after the original publication. In well-justified cases, open science publications may be waived. Such cases must be reported to the Helmholtz Association head office in advance.

F) Extension of the funding period

The funding period can be extended in the following cases:

- The group leader has taken parental leave during the funding period. The time may be added to the funding period if appropriately justified.
- The group leader has experienced unavoidable downtimes during the funding period (e.g., severe illness, personal hardships). The time can be added to the funding period when made plausible.

Please note that these periods of leave or downtime cannot add up to more than one year (with exceptions for maternal and parental leave; see FAQ). The maximum funding period amounts to six years.