HELMHOLTZ

Research for grand challenges.

CALL FOR APPLICATIONS

As of November 06, 2026 for up to 12 **Helmholtz Investigator Groups** (Investigator Track) **& Helmholtz Innovation Exploration Groups** (Exploration Track)

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

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I. Objectives of the program

Investigator Track

The Helmholtz Investigator Groups (HIG) program aims to win the best researchers from Germany and abroad 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. Depending on the career perspective agreed with the hosting Helmholtz Center, a positive evaluation may lead to a permanent position at the Center.

Exploration Track

The Helmholtz Innovation Exploration Groups (HIEG) Track supports outstanding postdoctoral researchers who seek to establish an independent leadership profile at the interface of science and innovation while developing the early scientific foundations required for future application and impact. The track focuses on an early exploration and (pre-)validation phase in which scientific evidence, technological concepts and, where applicable, first prototypes are developed and tested to assess their potential for further translation.

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. Alongside the development of the project, group leaders are supported in strengthening their scientific, leadership, entrepreneurial and translational competencies and in identifying suitable pathways towards future application.

The program does not aim for the immediate development of a business model or commercialization strategy. It precedes more market-oriented activities supported by other Helmholtz transfer programs such as Helmholtz Enterprise. Instead, it enables researchers to generate robust scientific evidence, refine and validate the underlying concept, and build the competencies required to position the idea for subsequent innovation funding, collaboration with relevant partners or other pathways to application and impact.

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 criteria** apply for both tracks:

- **The outstanding researchers are at maximum six years of academic age.** 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.
- **Candidates with a permanent employment contract at the hosting Helmholtz Center are not eligible to apply.**

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:

Investigator Track

- **International research experience.** Candidates are expected to have gained at least six months of international research experience outside Germany during their doctoral or postdoctoral phase. This experience may be accumulated across several research stays and does not need to be continuous. It should involve substantial scientific work in an international research environment. Short-term activities such as conference attendance, workshops or similar events do not normally count towards the six-month requirement. In duly justified exceptional cases, the Helmholtz Association may recognize equivalent international scientific experience. Such cases must be discussed with the Helmholtz Head Office before submission of the application. The final decision on eligibility rests with the Helmholtz Head Office.
- **Recruitment of external talents.** The Helmholtz Investigator Groups program is a recruiting instrument with a strong emphasis to gain external talents for Helmholtz. For 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.

Exploration 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 investigator track and the exploration track is the **hosting Helmholtz Center**.

III. Type, scope and amount of funding

Funding will be granted for up to twelve 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 Initiative and Networking Fund (INF) provides funding of up to EUR 200,000 per year. The Helmholtz Center (and partners, where applicable) is expected to contribute co-funding of at least EUR 150,000 per year on average. **Thus, Investigator Groups and Innovation Exploration Groups benefit from an overall annual funding volume of at least EUR 350,000 on average over a five-year period**.

Investigator 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.

Exploration 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 central selection criteria are:

Investigator Track

- **Outstanding scientific achievements and research experience of the applicant**, as reflected in the quality and impact of their research contributions and recognitions, assessed relative to their career stage.
- **Independent scientific vision and potential to establish a distinct research direction**, including the ability to develop and pursue an independent scientific agenda beyond the doctoral project and to shape and further develop the research program as new findings emerge.
- **Quality, scientific originality and potential impact of the proposed research project**, including its relevance to the research field, advancement beyond the state of the art and potential to generate significant new scientific knowledge.
- **Scientific soundness and feasibility of the proposed research program**, including an appropriate methodological approach, realistic implementation, awareness of key scientific risks and credible alternative strategies. This also includes access to the expertise, research infrastructure and collaborations required for successful implementation of the project. The cooperation between the Helmholtz Center and the partner university should provide a supportive framework for the successful development of the Investigator Group.
- **Leadership potential and the ability to develop the skills required to lead an independent research group**, supervise international and diverse doctoral researchers and create an effective and supportive research environment.

Exploration 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 scientific foundation for future application, industry cooperation or potential spin-off creation.
- **Transformative innovation potential of the underlying idea**, i.e., its distinctiveness and potential to enable a step change beyond existing scientific or technological approaches and to create future societal or economic value. Applicants should explain the potential application, why the proposed approach provides a convincing advantage over existing solutions, and how value could realistically be created if the exploratory work is successful.
- **Entrepreneurial and translational motivation and development potential of the applicant**, together with the potential to build and lead an interdisciplinary exploration team. This includes willingness to engage with relevant pathways to application and impact, including technology transfer, industry collaboration, entrepreneurship, policy advice or other forms of societal use, and to develop the skills required to advance the project beyond the exploratory phase.
- **Feasibility and structure of the proposed five-year plan**, including a credible strategy

for scientific and technological validation, appropriately defined milestones and decision points, realistic project scope and team composition, awareness of key scientific and technological uncertainties, and credible alternative approaches where needed. This also includes access to the expertise, infrastructure, research environment and collaborations required for successful implementation of the project.

For both tracks, the selection meeting will also assess the **candidate's ability to clearly communicate** the scientific essence and vision of their proposed work, demonstrate ownership of the research program, respond thoughtfully to critical questions and engage convincingly in scientific discussion.

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 **February 11, 2027**, indicating the planned applications (see Application Annex AA1) via ProMeta.

3. **Submission of complete applications.** The person in charge at the Helmholtz Center submits the complete application documents to the Helmholtz head office via the project management platform ProMeta by **May 3, 2027**.

Maximum number of nominations per Helmholtz Center:

no more than 4 applications:	▪ Deutsches Zentrum für Luft- und Raumfahrt DLR ▪ Forschungszentrum Jülich FZJ ▪ Karlsruher Institut für Technologie KIT
no more than 3 applications:	▪ 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:	▪ Deutsches Zentrum für Neurodegenerative Erkrankungen DZNE ▪ GEOMAR Helmholtz-Zentrum für Ozeanforschung Kiel ▪ Helmholtz-Zentrum Potsdam – Deutsches Geoforschungszentrum GFZ ▪ GSI Helmholtz-Zentrum für Schwerionenforschung[1] ▪ 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

4. **Formal criteria check.** After submission, the applications undergo a formal criteria check. Incomplete documents or non-compliance with formal eligibility requirements may lead to exclusion from the selection process.

5. **Selection meetings.** All eligible 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 (see also Call Annex CA1).
- **February 11, 2027:** Deadline for binding preliminary applications submitted by the Helmholtz Centers via the project management platform ProMeta
- **May 3, 2027:** Deadline for submission of complete application documents by the Helmholtz Centers via the project management platform ProMeta
- **June / July 2027:** Selection meetings (exact dates to be announced)
- **No more than nine months after funding approval:** Start of the Helmholtz Investigator or Innovation Exploration Group

[1] The GSI is eligible to apply only via Helmholtz Institute Jena and Mainz.

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 3, 2027 (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. Financial plan (ProMeta, cf. AA2-HIG / AA2-HIEG)
4. General data (AA3-HIG / AA3-HIEG)
5. Confirmation of terms of agreement (AA4-HIG / AA4-HIEG)
6. Statement on AI use in the proposal preparation (AA5)
7. Data consent (AA6)
8. Selection statistics (AA7-HIG / AA7-HIEG)
9. Career development plan and, for HIG, evaluation concept (AA8-HIG / AA8-HIEG)
10. University statement (AA9-HIG)

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

Investigator 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 and the applicant's independent research direction for the Helmholtz Investigator Group**, demonstrating the relevance of the project to the research discipline(s), its contribution beyond the current state of the art, and 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 significance[2] 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.
- **CV** (no more than 3 pages, Arial 10 pt.; incl. supervision experiences)
- **List of relevant research outputs, recognitions and distinctions**

Exploration Track

Please submit the following documents in one PDF file:

- **Research proposa**l (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, the problem to be addressed, the expected value and the potential advantage over existing approaches.
  - **Scientific independence and future research direction**. A brief description of the applicant's independent scientific contributions to date and how these form the basis for developing a distinct research direction beyond the doctoral project.
  - **A timeline with clearly defined work packages, milestones and go/no-go points**, describing the planned progression and feasibility of the project and reflecting its early-stage exploratory nature.
  - **A concept of cooperation with the Helmholtz Center and, where applicable, relevant research institutions, transfer offices, industry partners or innovation ecosystems**, describing how the necessary expertise, infrastructure and collaborations support the proposed project.
  - **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.

[2] 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.)
- **List of relevant research outputs, recognitions and distinctions**

Financial plan (ProMeta and Application Annex AA2-HIG / AA2-HIEG)

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).

General data (Application Annex AA3-HIG / AA3-HIEG)

Please provide the general data requested in Application Annex AA3.

Terms of agreement (Application Annex AA4-HIG / AA4-HIEG)

Use Application Annex AA4 to confirm the terms of agreement and the commitment of the hosting Center.

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-HIG / AA7-HIEG)

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

Career development plan and, for HIG, evaluation concept (Application Annex AA8-HIG / AA8-HIEG)

Investigator Track

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

Exploration Track

- Use Application Annex AA8-HIEG 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 Investigator 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.

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).

Investigator Track

University statement (Application Annex AA9-HIG)

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 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

The planned start date of the group should be agreed between the group leader and the Helmholtz Center in advance. Following a positive funding decision, any changes to the agreed start date must be communicated to the Helmholtz Association Head Office before the grant agreement is concluded. The grant agreement is then issued between the Helmholtz Association and the applying Helmholtz Center and forms the basis for the funding.

B) Mandatory leadership training in the Helmholtz Leadership Academy

Group leaders are required to attend a specifically designed leadership development program at the Helmholtz Academy in the first or second year of the funding period. The program prepares participants for their new leadership responsibilities and supports them in successfully developing their group. The course fees of approx. €5,900[3] 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.

[3] The final fee will be announced when registering for the academy.

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

Investigator 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 assesses the scientific performance and development of the group and its leader. Where a tenure perspective has been agreed with the group leader, an unequivocally positive evaluation forms the basis for the transition to a permanent position at the Helmholtz Center. The outcome of the evaluation must be sent to the Helmholtz Association Head Office in an evaluation report by the end of the fourth funding year at the latest.

Exploration 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.

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 primarily 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). As a rule, the maximum funding period amounts to six years.