HELMHOLTZ

Research for grand challenges.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

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1. Eligibility Criteria

What if I do not meet the eligibility criteria?

In general, candidates who do not meet these requirements are advised not to apply. If a Helmholtz Center wishes to submit an application on behalf of such a candidate (due to compelling reasons for an exception from the rule), it should contact the Helmholtz Head Office to discuss the case before submitting an application. Eligibility cannot be guaranteed if such cases are only raised after submission.
Please note: No exception can be made to the requirement that candidates must not hold a permanent employment contract at the hosting Helmholtz Center.

What should I know about the eligibility criteria?

Fictional examples illustrating how academic age is calculated

1) Laura was awarded her PhD in January 2020. Two years into her postdoc phase, she gave birth to a child. Her academic age on May 3, 2027, is 5 years and 10 months (18 months are deducted). She is eligible.
2) Nikola was awarded his PhD in April 2021. In order to care for his children, he worked part-time (25%) over the course of one year in his postdoc phase. His academic age at May 3, 2027, is 5 years and 4 months (1 year of 25% part-time equals 3 months of academic age). He is eligible.
3) Ebru was awarded her PhD in May 2020. After completing her PhD, she worked full-time in industry for two years before returning to academia for a postdoctoral position. Her academic age at May 3, 2027, is 5 years (2 years are subtracted). She is eligible.

In the case of **multiple doctorates**, the first doctorate degree is used to calculate academic age. For medical professionals, a medical doctor degree is also accepted as a doctorate degree.

Investigator Track

Fictional examples illustrating the international research experience requirement

1) During her postdoctoral phase, Amina spent four months conducting research at a university in Sweden and later another three months at a collaborating institute in the Netherlands. Amina fulfils the international research experience requirement.
2) During his doctoral and postdoctoral phase, Daniel attended several international conferences and workshops abroad and participated in a summer school. Although these activities provided valuable international exposure, participation in such events does not in itself constitute a research stay and therefore does not count towards the six-month requirement.
3) Mei spent three months conducting research at a partner institution abroad and has since worked closely and continuously with international research partners. Longer stays abroad were difficult to realize due to care responsibilities. In such a case, equivalent international scientific experience may be considered. The case should be discussed with the Helmholtz Head Office before submission of the application.

In duly justified cases, equivalent **international research experience** may be recognized even if the six-month requirement has not been fully met. This may apply, for example, where longer periods abroad were plausibly difficult due to care responsibilities, family circumstances, health-related reasons or other personal hardships. In such cases, other forms of substantial international scientific experience may be considered as equivalent. This may include, for example, sustained scientific collaboration in an international research environment. Such cases are assessed individually and should be discussed with the Helmholtz Head Office before submission.

For the purpose of assessing eligibility with regard to the maximum **one-year employment rule**, the relevant criterion is the applicant's actual time working at the host institution. The formal employer or source of funding is irrelevant. This includes periods spent at the institution under scholarships, fellowships, or similar arrangements.

2. Helmholtz Innovation Exploration Groups: Distinction from other funding programs

How do I determine whether Helmholtz Innovation Exploration Group or Helmholtz Enterprise is the appropriate funding program for my project?
The Helmholtz Innovation Exploration Groups and Helmholtz Enterprise address different stages and objectives of innovation development. HIEG is designed as both project and career development funding. It supports outstanding early-career researchers in developing an innovation-driven research agenda while at the same time strengthening their scientific, entrepreneurial and leadership profile. The project itself is situated at an early, research-driven exploration phase in which the scientific and technological foundations of an innovation are further developed, validated and strengthened. Helmholtz Enterprise typically addresses a later stage with a stronger focus on transfer and spin-off development.
Applicants should therefore carefully assess which development stage their project is currently in and which funding objective best matches their needs. A project would normally be expected to fit more clearly with one of the two funding logics.

3. International academic and/or private partners

Can international academic and/or private partners be involved in the Helmholtz Investigator Group or Helmholtz Innovation Exploration Group?
Cooperation with international partners is strongly encouraged, but they cannot receive any funding from the Initiative and Networking Fund (INF). Similarly, cooperation with private sector organizations to enhance knowledge and technology transfer is encouraged, but they cannot receive any funding from the INF.

4. Deadline for submission of documents and submission in ProMeta

Which documents must be submitted before or after the submission deadline?
One document must be submitted **before the official submission deadline**: the Advance notice of planned applications (Application Annex AA1) must be submitted by the Helmholtz Centers via ProMeta by February 11, 2027 as a binding pre-registration for the submission of full applications.

Applications for HIG and HIEG are submitted in ProMeta through **separate application tracks** and under new grant identification numbers.

After a positive selection decision (and before the group officially starts), the following additional annexes must be submitted to the contact person indicated in the call:

Investigator Track: 1) Career development plan and evaluation concept (Application Annex AA8-HIG as one consolidated PDF) and 2) University Statement (Application Annex AA9-HIG).

Exploration Track: Career development plan (Application Annex AA8-HIEG).

5. Financial plan

Where should I integrate the financial plan for the five years and which financial categories must be specified?
The financial plan must be entered in the ProMeta project management platform. In addition, the financial plan must be created using the provided template (see Application Annex AA2) and attached to the proposal. The cost items must be explained in the proposal itself, in accordance with the instructions and examples provided in the template. The financial plan covers the following categories:

- Personnel (in full-time equivalent (FTE) over the project duration)
- Material costs (incl. travel)
- Investments (if applicable)

The Helmholtz Center co-funding may include both cash and in-kind contributions. The distribution of funds across individual years may vary according to project needs.

Travel expenses can be included under material costs. No funding will be granted for overheads. Matching funds may not contain overheads.
If doctoral researchers are to be hired: The Helmholtz Association aims to offer doctoral researchers regular employment contracts, including social security contributions (see doctoral guidelines).

As a general rule, only German university or non-university research organizations may receive funding from the INF. Other partners may contribute their own funds, but may not receive funding from the INF.

6. Electronic signatures

Are electronic signatures required?
Electronic signatures that meet the standards of an Advanced Electronic Signature (AES) or a Qualified Electronic Signature (QES) are required only for the Terms of Agreement, for which a legally binding signature is mandatory. For all other documents, the form of signature is not decisive.

7. Responsibility for export control and knowledge security

Who is responsible for conducting security checks of scientists nominated for funding?
The Helmholtz Centers are responsible for assessing potential risks associated with scientists' activities, particularly with regard to unwanted knowledge transfer or the unauthorized acquisition of sensitive scientific knowledge. This must be carried out before the final application documents are submitted.

8. Resubmission of applications

Can I resubmit an application?
Resubmission is not categorically excluded, but should only be considered if the final selection panel has encouraged the candidate to resubmit. If there is any uncertainty as to whether resubmission is appropriate, the Head Office should be contacted. If a Center resubmits an application, developments and changes since the last application must be described in detail (see Annex AA3).

9. Evaluation

Investigator Track
How does the evaluation work?
In the case of funding, a contract is drawn up between the Head Office and the Helmholtz Center, in which it is agreed that the results of an evaluation of the HIG leader must be available by the end of the fourth funding year at the latest. The details of the evaluation, including the process, evaluation criteria and, where applicable, the conditions for a transition to a permanent position, are determined by the Helmholtz Center or agreed between the candidate and the Center. It is recommended to clarify these arrangements as early as possible.

10. Appointment to a professorship

What happens if the group leader is appointed to a professorship before the end of the group?
If a professorship is taken up, the group can continue as long as it is ensured that the group leader can continue to lead the group. The salary of the group leader is excluded from the financial planning (to the extent that it is financed by another source) and cannot be transferred to other persons or costs.

11. Extension of funding period

What is the maximum extension of the funding period?
Normally, periods of leave or downtime accepted as a reason for extending the group cannot exceed one year in total. Additional extensions may be granted for maternity and parental leave. For maternity leave, the funding period may be extended by the period of statutory maternity protection before the birth of the child (normally six weeks). In the case of single parents, up to two additional months may be granted to reflect the parental leave period that would otherwise be available to the second parent. In these cases, the total maximum extension is 15 months and two weeks.