

### Strategic projects

# Strategic Experimental Spaces

## Higher education development requires flexibility

**Profile Area:** Understanding Research

**Deadline:** September 10, 2026, 2 pm

Over the past two decades, German universities have been very successful in developing their own strategic capabilities. However, they are now increasingly coming up against legal and bureaucratic limits that are hindering their further strategic development and preventing them from fulfilling their diverse tasks in a dynamically changing world.

In order to break the deadlock, the Volkswagen Foundation would like to provide targeted impetus. The Volkswagen Foundation invites universities, in conjunction with the relevant ministries, to open and design experimental spaces to test new forms of cross-border or cross-institutional cooperation. To this end, restrictive regulations are to be suspended by the government and new scope created for the strategic further development of universities.



Funding Type: Strategic Projects



Target Group: Heads of Universities, Ministries



Max.: 500,000 EUR



Max.: 2 - 5 years

## 1 Objectives

Universities are facing ever greater challenges: while their financial margin is shrinking, the demands placed on them as institutions are growing – in the international competition for excellent students and researchers, in their function as innovation incubators, and in their role in ongoing transformation processes. At the same time, universities are working with an outdated set of rules that hinders the creative handling of current challenges.

The aim of the call for proposals is thus to create spaces for experimentation within which new strategic alliances can be formed and new solutions can be tested. To this end, it is initially necessary to create exceptional and special regulations on a case-by-case basis. Applicant universities are therefore encouraged to enter into a dialogue with the relevant ministries regarding regulations and requirements that need to be suspended in order to open up new ways of implementing important strategic goals.

Funding will be provided for experimental spaces that arise from such cooperation between the applicant university and the relevant ministries. The strategic alliance to be tested in such an experimental space can also include other universities, universities of applied sciences, extramural research institutions or other necessary cooperation partners.

The creation of such experimental spaces is intended to test whether an extended amount of freedom granted in certain areas should be made available to other universities in the future on a permanent and systematic basis, i.e. at the state or national level. If successful, the experimental spaces should thus serve as a model for other institutions and federal states.

The long-term goal is to use this impulse to contribute to a results-oriented and experience-based reduction of regulations and bureaucracy in the German science system in order to strengthen the strategic, operational and reactive capabilities of science institutions in Germany.

## 2 Scope of Funding

Funding will be provided for concepts that advance the central strategic objectives of the applicant universities, which, however, could not yet be implemented under the existing regulations. The participating ministries should make this possible within the framework of the projects, e.g. by using experimental clauses, in order to create strategic experimental spaces.

The Foundation is seeking projects that promote performance and cooperation in equal measure, that use available resources efficiently with a view to concrete cross-university strategic goals, and that thus achieve a predefined impact. In order to create the necessary leeway, universities (e.g. by optimizing their governance structures) and ministries (by suspending restrictive regulations) must work together. The applicants should align their respective scientific and regulatory perspectives and focus on the common goal of a sustainable science system in order to enable bold innovation.

The Volkswagen Foundation can provide up to 500,000 Euros each for 10 projects.

The projects are basically free in terms of their content, the necessary creation of regulatory leeway, and their budgetary design, as long as they correspond to the overarching goals of the call for proposals and are eligible for funding within the framework of the statutes of the Volkswagen Foundation.

The focus of the proposed experimental spaces should be on improving the structural framework conditions for exploratory, pioneering research. Possible strategic goals include, for example:

- intensifying the cooperation between university and extramural research institutes, e.g. in the use of large-scale equipment or in the training of excellent scientists;
- intensifying cross-border cooperation between universities to strengthen profile and network building;
- testing new concepts and structures for permanent employments to increase the attractiveness of universities for excellent scientists from Germany and abroad;
- removing barriers to innovation, transfer and spin-offs;
- effective solutions for the maintenance and timely renewal of university infrastructure.

What cannot be funded:

- location-dependent projects that are not transferable to other contexts or regions;
- projects that can already be implemented under existing regulations or require only minor adjustments;
- project proposals without clear support from the responsible ministry.

### 3 Application and Selection Procedure

Universities that are constrained in their further strategic development by external restrictions are eligible to apply. One application per university can be submitted by the university leadership. Each ministry can participate in up to three applications with a statement. Cooperating universities and extramural institutions can apply for their own partial budgets as co-applicants within the framework of an overall project.

At least one ministry of science must be involved in an application as a cooperation partner. The ministry's main contribution consists of creating the regulatory leeway necessary for the project. The ministries can make an additional financial contribution to the proposed project, but this is not a requirement for a successful application.

#### 3.1 Schedule

- **September 10, 2026:** Deadline for project proposals.
- **November 2026:** Review of project proposals; follow-up questions or suggestions for revisions, if necessary
- **March 2027:** Decision by the Board of Trustees of the Volkswagen Foundation

#### 3.2 Procedure

The review process consists of two stages. At both stages, it is carried out by an international panel of representatives from university management, science and research, and science policy with an excellent knowledge of the German system and its current challenges.

The focus of the first stage of the review process is on the strategic importance of the project for the respective university as well as on the potential for renewal that the newly opened experimental space offers for the German research system. It is expected that

1. the responsible ministry will significantly relax regulations and boldly reduce obstructive bureaucracy, as promised in a binding letter, and that it shows
2. openness to the perspective of expanding the created experimental spaces to include further institutions.

## 4 Information on the Application

### 4.1 Application Documents

- Project proposal from the university (conceptual plan, 10 pages)
  - Mention of the defined strategic goal and the steps taken so far to achieve this goal
  - Specific information on which concrete regulations need to be adapted or repealed to achieve the goal
  - Explanation of internal obstacles that could prevent successful implementation and how these are to be overcome
  - Explanation of how the project results will be sustainably secured (to what extent can the project be continued and, if necessary, expanded at the applicant university if it is successful?)
  - Explanation of the scaling potential (to what extent can this project be transferred to other universities if it is successful?)
  - Cost plan - draft (including explanations of the cost plan)
  - Explanation of the composition of the team responsible for implementation
    - including a conceptual explanation regarding the release of permanent employees for the project, as well as
    - consideration of future career prospects for employees in temporary positions
  - CVs of the responsible project management(s)
- Statements from all cooperation partners required to implement the project (partner universities, extramural institutions, companies, etc.)
- Binding declaration of the responsible ministry's intention to implement the project.
- Mention of the conditions that still need to be clarified (parliamentary decisions, coordination with other ministries, etc.), including the time frame required

### 4.2 Our Funding Platform

Applications have to be submitted via the Volkswagen Foundation's [funding platform](#). All templates (CV, staff concept, expenditure plan, etc.) are available for download on the funding platform and on the website for the respective programme announcement. Please only use the templates available for download there when submitting your application.

In the case of international participation, the partner at the German research institution must create the application in the funding platform and be defined as PI. Otherwise, PI and Co-PI are equal partners.

It is important that all applicants (PI, Co-PIs, etc.) register early on in the process. Co-applicant(s) can only be invited to work on an application if they have registered.

For further support please contact [support@volkswagenstiftung.de](mailto:support@volkswagenstiftung.de).

### **4.3 Information on Enclosures**

Unless otherwise specified below, please use only the template available for download at the funding platform or on the website for the respective programme announcement.

#### **4.3.1 Expenditure Plan**

Please use the Excel template only available for download at the funding platform. It is not possible to upload and use other Excel sheets. For instructions on how to fill in the template, please refer to the respective help sheet.

Please note: Each co-PI has to submit an individual expenditure plan.

#### **4.3.2 Curricula Vitae**

Please submit the curricula vitae of all applicants in tabular, narrative form.

#### **4.3.3 Equal Opportunity Funds**

To support equal opportunities and diversity in the research system, the Volkswagen Foundation offers the possibility to apply for equal opportunity funds. These funds – granted in addition to the maximum funding sum – support measures that serve to compensate for disadvantages at an individual level and/or aim to strengthen diversity in the education and research system in general. Equal Opportunity Funds can be applied for up to 1% of the total application amount (excluding overheads).

For further information please refer to our [website](#).

### **4.4 Further Information**

#### **4.4.1 Overheads**

With the exception of Max Planck, Leibniz, Fraunhofer and Helmholtz institutes, public or non-profit scientific institutions in Germany can apply for up to 10% overheads in addition to the direct project costs. For more information on overheads, see 'Information on Lump Sum for Overheads', which is provided at our [download section](#).

#### **4.4.2 General Information**

The foundation cannot be held responsible for any obligations entered into prior to the receipt of grant approval.

Applications that have been or are intended to be submitted in this or a similar form to another funding organization will not be processed by the foundation. Applications that do not meet the formal requirements will not be considered for review. The foundation can only award funds to scientific institutions.

## 5 Contact

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## 6 Further Information

- [Website Strategic Experimental Spaces](#)
- [Website VolkswagenStiftung](#)
- [FAQ and Service \(including download section\)](#)
- [Influence of Generative AI on Research and the Volkswagen Foundation's Funding Activities](#)
- [Recommendations for Sustainable Travel](#)