

## Research Projects

# Pioneering Research – Exploring the Unknown Unknown

**Profile Area:** Exploration

**Deadline:** 27 August 2026 (02:00 pm CEST)

With the funding initiative "Pioneering Research – Exploring the Unknown Unknown", the Volkswagen Foundation supports groundbreaking and risky research ideas with high scientific relevance. We are looking for basic research projects that are not dedicated to the already 'known unknown', but that strive to explore the 'unknown unknown' thereby holding the potential for major scientific breakthroughs, but also for failure.



Research Area: all



Funding Type: visionary projects in the field of basic research



Target Group: post-doctoral researchers and professors at German universities and other research institutions, (international) collaborations are possible



Max.: 1.3 million EUR



Max.: 3 to 5 years



Highly competitive two-stage selection process incl. Distributed Peer Review

# 1 Objectives

Pioneering work in basic research leads to new insights that enable long-term progress. If successful, this type of research can reveal the unknown, establish knowledge foundations, and facilitate scientific breakthroughs and innovative scientific concepts.

This is where the Volkswagen Foundation's funding initiative comes in, supporting unconventional ideas that venture into previously unexplored areas of **basic research**. The idea is to take risks, ask unorthodox questions and use experimental approaches to solve major scientific challenges and generate new knowledge without a defined commercialization and application context. Clearly, failure is part of the process.

We are looking for **explorative** projects from all disciplines in which a scientifically sound, coherent and plausible **vision** for the development of the 'unknown unknown' is developed. The terms 'visionary' and 'explorative' may be defined in distinct ways across different research disciplines:

- In the life sciences, natural sciences and engineering, for example, this may mean generating breakthrough knowledge that advances our understanding of the fundamental principles of nature and opens up new technological possibilities. It also includes new ways of investigating previously unknown phenomena and developing new methods or experimental approaches to push the boundaries of knowledge and explore new scientific areas.
- In the humanities, cultural and social sciences, it includes, for example, the development of theoretical models that provide new explanations for complex social, cultural or historical phenomena, or the development of new methods of interpretation or analysis to explore and understand previously unknown aspects of human experience or social processes.

## **Pioneering research projects must fulfil all of the following criteria:**

- Your project is clearly embedded in **basic research**.
- Your project is **radically explorative** and **breaks new scientific ground**. There are no publications on your specific research topic and as little preliminary work as possible.
- Your project has a **high scientific relevance** and a **high knowledge potential** and, if successful, closes a large knowledge gap. It addresses a previously unexplored scientific challenge and, if successful, will provide fundamental new **impetus** in the specialist community addressed and possibly even beyond in other disciplines.
- You expect your project idea to lead to **important breakthroughs** that could significantly advance the respective field of research or even trigger a **paradigm shift**.
- Due to a high **conceptual or methodological risk**, there is a possibility that your project will fail or not deliver the intended findings. For example, your hypotheses or assumptions may turn out to be incorrect during the research process, or the methods and

technologies used may not work as anticipated. Nevertheless, your project appears to be feasible in principle, methodologically sound and balanced in terms of potential knowledge gain and risk.

- As a motivated project leader/team, you will dedicate yourself to new scientific challenges with curiosity and a willingness to take risks. You are **excellently qualified** with regard to the feasibility and realization of the project.

### **Funding is not possible for projects that...**

- promise only an incremental gain in knowledge or little progress in an existing field of research and would be eligible for funding by e.g. DFG individual research grants.
- represent a classical continuation of one's own work or the next logical step in one's own research or in the research community addressed. This explicitly includes projects that simply transfer or apply technologies or methods developed in another research area to one's own research without a genuinely new scientific question or hypothesis.
- claim novelty solely by combining already established methods or that aim to develop a method without a scientific hypothesis.
- are primarily application-oriented or aimed at translation from the outset.
- are primarily aimed at development of therapeutic approaches and diagnostics or include clinical trials.
- are purely PhD projects. In case you plan to apply for PhD positions, you must carefully consider your staff concept in view of the risky nature of the project. Even if the research project fails, it must be ensured that the PhD project can still be successfully completed.
- overlap with the Volkswagen Foundation's current thematic funding initiatives.

## **2 Scope of Funding**

The funding initiative is open to post-doctoral researchers and professors at German universities and other research institutions. International researchers can be included as Co-PIs. Each person may participate in only one short proposal, either as PI or as Co-PI.

The funding initiative is deliberately designed to be broad and flexible: We are looking for projects from all constellations and disciplines; collaborative projects are also possible. The Foundation provides up to 1.3 million euros for a funding period of at least 3 to a maximum of 5 years. The budget should reflect the requirements of the project and the project constellation.

## 3 Application and Selection Procedure

### 3.1 Procedure

Funding decisions are made through a two-stage selection procedure. In the first stage, the Volkswagen Foundation makes use of **Distributed Peer Review (DPR)**, a review procedure, where applicants for funding agree to **anonymously** review each other's proposals. Detailed information on the implementation and handling of the DPR can be found in our [DPR Rules and Guidelines](#), which are binding for all applicants in this funding initiative.

#### Stage 1: Anonymous Short Proposal and DPR

- The evaluation at this stage is conducted **anonymously** (double-blind).
- Applicants must submit a **short proposal** in time for the **deadline**, which undergoes an **internal eligibility check** based on formal criteria.
- All **formally correct proposals** go through **DPR**. Each short proposal is reviewed by 8-10 other applicants using a standardized template.
- The **matching** of short proposals to reviewers is based on the applicants' specified areas of expertise and the respective research areas of the suggested project.
- You have approximately **6 weeks** to complete up to 8 reviews. Failure to submit the reviews by the deadline results in exclusion from the procedure.
- The Foundation staff uses the reviews to determine a **final ranking**. In the unlikely event of a tie in the final ranking of two or more proposals, a lottery is used.
- The top approximately 30 short proposals with the best evaluations from the DPR are invited to submit a full proposal.
- All applicants receive feedback on their short proposal.

#### Stage 2: Full Proposal and Panel Review

- Applicants invited to submit a full proposal receive detailed guidelines about the subsequent process and the respective new deadline. A minimum of at least 6 weeks is given to prepare the full proposal.
- The submitted full proposals (not anonymised) are reviewed by an international and interdisciplinary panel of experts. Based on the panel's recommendations, the Volkswagen Foundation's CEO and Board of Trustees decide on funding.

## 3.2 Overview

11 June 2026, 10:00 am to 11:30 am CEST	Online consultation I
16 July 2026, 10:00 am to 11:30 am CEST	Online consultation II
27 August 2026, 02:00 pm CEST	Submission deadline short proposals
November/December 2026	Distributed Peer Review of short proposals
January 2027	Communication of Distributed Peer Review decision Invitation to submit a full proposal
Spring/Summer 2027	Full proposal stage including panel review
Autumn 2027	Communication of the final decision on full proposals

Due to the DPR and unforeseen issues such as expected high number of submitted short proposals, delays in the procedure may occur and will be communicated.

A preliminary assessment of project ideas on the fit to the funding initiative is **not** provided, as the short proposal stage is specifically designed to identify and select proposals that match the initiative.

## 4 Information on the Application

### 4.1 Our Funding Platform

Applications and short proposals must be submitted via the Volkswagen Foundation's [funding platform](#). Templates for the short proposal and CV 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 applicants (PI, Co-PIs, etc.) register early in the process. Co-PIs can only be invited to work on an application if they have registered.

For technical and administrative reasons, only **one Co-PI can be added** to a collaborative project during the short proposal stage. This Co-PI will also participate in the DPR process. Additional Co-PIs can be added during the full proposal stage.

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

## 4.2 Information on Enclosures

Please only use the template available for download at the funding platform or on the website for the respective programme announcement.

### 4.2.1 Short Proposal

Please observe the specifications in the template regarding the maximum number of pages as well as the other formal requirements. Proposals should be written anonymously, in English language and for a broader scientific audience, enabling evaluation by reviewers outside the field. A brief and tentative expenditure plan is included in the short proposal template.

### 4.2.2 Curricula Vitae

Please observe the specifications in the template and submit the curricula vitae of all applicants in tabular, narrative form.

### 4.2.3 Further Enclosures

If you are not currently affiliated with a German research institution or university, you must upload a **letter of intent** from the institution where you plan to conduct the project.

## 4.3 Further Information

### 4.3.1 Overheads

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

### 4.3.2 Open Science

The Foundation is committed to Open Science ([Open Science Policy](#)). Thus, we expect that results will be published open access and that data generated will be made available for scientific use following the FAIR principles via recognized repositories (see [NFDIs](#), [re3data](#), and [RI-sources](#)).

Note: The Volkswagen Foundation offers the module 'Data Reuse - Additional funding for the preparation of research data' for funded projects to prepare research data. You can apply for the module during or up to six months after the project duration.

#### **4.3.3 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 VolkswagenStiftung](#)
- [Website programme announcement](#)
- [FAQ and Service \(including download section\)](#)
- [Influence of Generative AI on Research and the Volkswagen Foundation's Funding Activities](#)
- [Project Database](#)