

CALL FOR APPLICATIONS

As of December 15, 2023 for up to 9

Helmholtz Investigator Groups

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

21st Call for Applications | Deadline April 30, 2024

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I. Objectives of the program

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, the results of which must be available at the end of the fourth year of funding, Investigator Group leaders are granted a permanent position at the Helmholtz Center.

Funding will be granted for up to nine Helmholtz Investigator 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 150,000 Euros maximum per annum. The Helmholtz Center (and the partner university if applicable) are expected to provide co-funding with an equivalent of 150,000 Euros minimum. Thus, **Investigator Groups receive a minimum of 300,000 Euros a year for a five-year period**. The funding covers costs for:

- the group leader position, normally at E 14/15 TVöD (collective agreement 14/15 for civil service employees),
- scientific and/or technical staff (normally three or four),
- expenses for materials, travel, and investments.

The Helmholtz Association supports Investigator Group leaders who experience unavoidable downtimes during the funding. Group leaders who take parental or care leave, become severely ill or experience other plausible forms of unavoidable scientific downtime can prolong their funding period to a maximum of six years.

II. Target group and eligibility

The Helmholtz Association aims to win **outstanding postdoctoral researchers** to establish their own Investigator 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:

- **The outstanding researchers are two to six 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 the Addendum on page 10):
 - For maternity leave / parental leave of the birth giving parent, the track record considered can 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 not giving 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 you took over the main share of family work.
 - If you have been seriously ill long-term (i.e. more than 90 days), cared full-time for a family member in need or suffered other personal hardships (e.g., flight or asylum), which did not allow you to pursue your research, these periods of unavoidable downtime of your scientific career can also be considered.
 - 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 Annex 1). 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 is not passed on to the reviewers or the selection panel. A documentation of such times is only necessary upon request. However, the date of the Phd award is a mandatory information.

- **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 internal candidates, exceptions can only be made for outstanding researchers who are employed at a Helmholtz Center for less than one year.

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. Our role model for calculating academic age are the gender-specific clock-stopping policies of the ERC Starting Grant as well as the DFG.

If a Helmholtz Center would like to nominate a candidate who does not fulfil these requirements, it should contact the Helmholtz Association in advance to discuss the case. Funding will only be provided in particularly plausible and well-justified exceptional cases.

III. Application

Candidates: Please contact the Helmholtz Center that you are interested in early (see also contact list in Annex 10). Each Helmholtz Center carries out an internal pre-selection at Center level to decide who will be nominated for the selection process at Helmholtz level.

A) Selection process

The application process involves the following main stages:

1. **Application of candidates at the Helmholtz Center.** Candidates should approach the Helmholtz Centers they are interested in directly with a draft of their application and get in touch with the contact persons indicated in Annex 10 before applying. The contact persons will inform them about the process of and deadline for the pre-selection at the Helmholtz center.
2. **Pre-selection at the Helmholtz Center and nomination of candidates.** Each Helmholtz Center carries out a transparent pre-selection process, which is documented in the selection statistics of the center (Annex 6). After the pre-selection, the Helmholtz Center nominates the most promising candidates and invites them to submit their complete application documents. The maximum number of candidates that each Helmholtz Center can nominate is as follows:

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 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

3. **Submission of applications.** The heads of the Helmholtz Centers submit the applications to the Helmholtz head office via the project management platform ProMeta.
4. **Review process and pre-selection by the President of the Helmholtz Association.** External reviewers assess the applications. Based on the written reviews, the President of the Helmholtz Association pre-selects the most promising candidates. These candidates will be invited approx. four weeks prior to the selection meeting.
5. **Final selection meeting.** The candidates present their proposals in front of an interdisciplinary panel of international experts. At the end of the meeting, the panel will take the final funding decision.
6. **Start of funding.** Successful candidates have to start their Helmholtz Investigator Group within 12 months after funding approval (otherwise, the funding will expire).

B) Selection criteria

The most important selection criteria are **outstanding scientific achievements and research experience of the candidates** (CV, publications, citation index, awards, etc.) as well as the **quality of the planned research project** (innovation capacity, relevance, structure, coherence, feasibility). Furthermore, **leadership qualities** and, in particular, the ability to supervise inter(national) and diverse doctoral researchers will be taken into account. In the final selection meeting, the candidates' ability to present the essence of their research in a condensed form and to defend their ideas will also play a role for the decision.

Further criteria include synergy effects resulting from the cooperation between the Helmholtz Center and the partner university as well as further cooperation partners if applicable.

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

C) Dates and deadlines

Candidates: Please contact the Helmholtz Center to obtain the exact **deadline of the internal selection process**.

April 30, 2024: Deadline for submission of complete application documents by the Helmholtz Centers to the Helmholtz Head Office via the project management platform ProMeta (cutoff date; key date for determining academic age of the candidate)

September 02, 2024: Deadline for submission of the university statement to the Helmholtz Head Office via the project management platform

October 22-23, 2024: Final selection meeting

No more than 12 months after receiving funding approval: Start of the Helmholtz Investigator Group

D) Formal requirements

Only complete applications will be considered!

- **Applications can only be handed in by the nominating Helmholtz Center.** The complete application documents (except for the university statement) must be submitted to the **project management platform ProMeta by April 30, 2024** (cut-off date). Please submit the application documents in English as PDF files or Excel files where this is required. The file names are generated automatically when uploading the files.
- If a former candidate intends to **resubmit an application**, the Center and the candidate in question should contact the head office to determine whether resubmission is recommended. If a center resubmits an application, developments and changes since the last application must be described in detail (see Annex 1).
- The **partner university** should be involved in the selection process at an early stage to ensure a smooth integration of the Helmholtz Investigator Group leaders into the departments of the partner university and ideally prepare a joint appointment as a professor. Please use Annex 8 ("University statement") to specify the rights and duties of the candidate at the partner university. Submit the university statement by **September 02, 2024** at the latest.

E) Application documents

1. Center cover letter
2. Application (research proposal, incl. CV, list of publications and awards, as one file)
3. General data (Annex 1)
4. Financial plan (Annex 2)
5. Confirmation of terms of agreement (Annex 3)
6. Personal career development plan and employment options after positive evaluation (Annex 4, as one file)
7. List of reviewers (Annex 5)
8. Selection statistics (Annex 6)
9. Data consent (Annex 7)
10. University statement (Annex 8)

Center cover letter

Letter from the board: Please provide a brief letter of recommendation for the candidate and an outline of the strategic importance of the research proposal to the Helmholtz Center and POF. Please refrain from submitting further letters of recommendation (e.g., from direct superiors or cooperation partners). These will not be considered in the further selection process.

Application

Please submit the following document 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 Investigator group, which demonstrates the relevance of the project to the research discipline(s)
 - a timeline with clearly defined work packages and milestones
 - a concept of cooperation with the Helmholtz Center and the partner university (as well as further cooperation partners, if applicable), highlighting the strategic significance and benefits of the planned cooperation as well as describing the fit to the respective Helmholtz program and the research focus of the partner university/department. 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 incl. h-Index (please highlight peer-reviewed and first or corresponding author publications), awards and patents (if applicable)

General data (Annex 1)

Please provide the general data requested in Annex 1.

Financial plan (Annex 2)

Use the Excel template provided to calculate the prospective finances of the group. Upload the file as Excel in ProMeta.

Terms of agreement (Annex 3)

Use Annex 3 to confirm the terms of agreement.

Career development plan and evaluation concept (Annex 4)

- Use Annex 4_a for the career development plan for the group leader
- Use Annex 4_b to describe the evaluation concept

Additional documents providing details about the career development plan or the evaluation concept should be added to this document. Please create one PDF file to submit Annex 4.

List of reviewers (Annex 5)

Use Annex 5 to indicate six unbiased reviewers (including at least two women scientists). If in doubt about potential bias, please do reach out to the Helmholtz Association early. You may also indicate up to two scientists who shall be excluded from a review request. Upload the file as Excel in ProMeta.

Selection statistics (Annex 6)

The Helmholtz Center should use Annex 6 to describe the pre-selection process and statistics.

Data consent (Annex 7)

Use Annex 7 to consent to our data policy which is presented in our data protection information (see Call Annex 9).

University statement (Annex 8)

A Helmholtz Investigator Group can be hosted at a Helmholtz Center or jointly at a Helmholtz Center and the partner university. Cooperation with international partners is strongly encouraged, though they cannot receive any funding from the INF. Similarly, though cooperation with private sector organizations is appreciated to increase knowledge and technology transfer, the latter cannot receive any funding from the INF.

Use Annex 8 to describe the rights and duties of the candidate at the partner university. High-ranking officials (e.g., President, Vice-Chancellor, and Dean) should sign it. The university statement can be submitted until September 02, 2024, the latest.

IV. Funding Phase

A) Funding decision and contract

After a positive funding decision, group leaders will negotiate their definite start date with the Helmholtz Center and inform the Helmholtz Association 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. This course was designed especially for the new Helmholtz Association Investigator Group leaders. The curriculum prepares participants for their new leadership responsibilities and supports them in successfully developing their group. The course fees of approx. €5,900³ can be factored into the application’s financial plan and covered either wholly or in part by the Centers. In addition, the Helmholtz Centers and partner universities also provide further qualification and career counselling services as specified in the career development plan.

C) Reporting

In each year of your funding, you have to submit reports covering the activities of your group by April 30. The reporting will be done via the project management platform ProMeta. At latest, six month after the end of the funding period, you have to submit a final report.

D) Evaluation of the Helmholtz Investigator Group

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 univocally positive evaluations. The outcome of the evaluation has to be sent to the Helmholtz Association in an evaluation report at the end of the fourth funding year at the latest.

E) Open science publication

By accepting funding from the Initiative and Networking Fund of the Helmholtz Association, candidates agree to make scientific publications based either 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. Those cases must be reported to the Helmholtz Association in advance.

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

F) Extension of the funding period

We can extend your funding period in the following cases:

- You have taken child or care leave during the funding period. The time can be added to your funding period when made plausible.
- You have experienced unavoidable downtimes during the funding period (e.g., severe illness, personal hardships). The time can be added to your funding period when made plausible.

Please note that these periods of leave or downtime cannot add up to more than one year. The maximum funding period amounts to six years.

Addendum

Fictional examples for how Helmholtz calculates academic age

Laura has been awarded her PhD in January 2017. Two years into her postdoc, she has given birth to her child. Her academic age at April 30, 2024, is 5 years and 9 months (18 months are subtracted). She is eligible.

Nikola has been awarded his PhD in August 2017. He has become a father of two during his postdoc. For each child, he has been on parental leave for 6 months, in which he has focused on his care responsibilities. His academic age at April 30, 2024, is 5 years and 8 months (6+6 months are subtracted). He is eligible.

Ebru has been awarded her PhD in April 2018. In order to care for her children, she has worked part-time (25 %) over the course of one year in her postdoc phase. Her academic age at April 30, 2024, is 5 years and 3 months (1 year of 25% part-time equals 3 months of academic age). She is eligible.

Ryo has been awarded a PhD in April 2017. Due to a car accident with a lengthy recovery, Ryo was not able to do research over the course of 15 months. Ryo's academic age is 5 years and 9 months at April 30, 2024. Ryo is eligible.