

Research projects

Pioneering Research – Exploring the Unknown Unknown

Profile area: Exploration

Deadline: September 3, 2024 (02:00 PM CET)

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.



area of research: all



type of funding: 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



up to 1.3 million EUR



3 to 5 years



Highly competitive two-stage selection process

1 Objective

Pioneering work in basic research leads to new insights that enable long-term progress. If successful, this type of research opens up the unknown, leading to a scientific leap and providing the basis for the development of new technologies and the emergence of 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 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 differently in the life, natural and technical sciences than in the humanities, cultural and social sciences:

- 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 unexplored 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 **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 or technologies used may not work as expected. 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 and your research is off the beaten track.

Funding is not possible for projects that...

- promise only an incremental gain in knowledge or little progress in an existing field of research.
- are primarily application-oriented or aimed at translation from the outset (e.g. clinical studies).
- combine established methods or aim to develop a method without a scientific hypothesis.
- 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 also includes the use of new technologies or methods developed in another research area.
- overlap with the Volkswagen Foundation's thematic funding initiatives.
- are purely PhD projects. Under certain conditions, you can apply for PhD positions. However, these must be explicitly justified in view of the risky nature of the project. It must also be ensured that the PhD project can be successfully completed even if the research project fails.
- may be eligible for support from other funding organizations (e.g. DFG, BMBF).

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-applicants.

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.

Overheads

State and state-recognized universities and universities for applied sciences can apply for 10 % overheads. For more information on overheads, see "Information on lump sum for overheads", which is provided in our [download-section](#).

Open Science

The Foundation is committed to Open Science ([Open Science Policy](#)). It is therefore expected that project results will be published open access and that data collected will be made available for scientific use via recognized repositories (see [NFDIs](#), [re3data](#), and [RIsources](#)). If data collection is intended, the essential information is to be presented in a data management plan ([basic](#)

[data management plan](#) of the Foundation or a more detailed data management plan of the respective discipline). In case no data is generated in the project, this needs to be explicitly stated in the application.

Note: For the later preparation of the project's research data, in the case of a grant, the offer '[Data Reuse - Additional funding for the preparation of research data](#)' is available.

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 submitted for review. The Foundation can only award funds to scientific institutions.

3 Application and Selection Procedure

3.1 Time schedule

- Deadline for the submission of draft proposals: September 3, 2024 (02:00 PM CET)
- The invitation to submit a proposal is issued approx. 4 months after submission of the draft proposals.
- The final decision is made approx. 5 months after submission of the proposals (approx. 10 months after the submission deadline for draft proposals).

3.2 Procedure

The projects to be funded are selected in a two-stage process:

- In the **first stage**, a draft proposal must be submitted. This serves as a basic check as to whether the project meets the formal and content-related criteria of the funding initiative. For this purpose, the draft proposals are reviewed internally. A quality check in the sense of a peer review does not yet take place at this stage. You will then receive feedback as to whether you will be invited to submit a proposal. Further information on the application process and the submission deadline (at least 6 weeks) will be communicated with the invitation to submit a proposal.
- In the **second stage**, the submitted proposals are reviewed by an interdisciplinary panel of experts. On the basis of the panel's recommendations, the Volkswagen Foundation's Board of Trustees decides on funding.

4 Application Checklist

4.1 Electronic Application – Instructions

All documents must be submitted via the Foundation's application portal. Please inform yourself about the Volkswagen Foundation's application portal before submitting an application. Information can be found in the document "[Instructions and tips](#)". It is important that all applicants register personally in the portal at an early stage. Without a user account, neither co-applicants can be invited to the application, nor can the application be submitted.

If you have any technical questions about using the portal, please contact support@volkswagenstiftung.de.

4.2 Application documents

4.2.1 Draft proposal template

For the **draft proposal** (first stage), please use the template available for download on the homepage. Proposals from the life, natural and technical sciences must be submitted in English, proposals from the humanities, cultural and social sciences in the common scientific language of the respective subject area.

4.2.2 Curriculum Vitae of every applicant

Please submit your scientific career in tabular-narrative form. A template is available on the funding initiative's website for this purpose.

5 Contact

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6 More information

- [Website Volkswagen Foundation](#)
- [FAQs for applicants](#)
- [Application System](#)
- [Electronic application made easy - instructions and tips](#)
- [Useful information and downloads](#)
- [Recommendations for sustainable travelling](#)
- [Influence of generative models of text and image creation in research and in the funding activities of the Volkswagen Foundation](#)