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Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

unite! | University Network for Innovation,
Technology and Engineering

Unite! Seed Fund Initiative
Research & PhD in Unite! Focus Areas
Call Spring 2026

Objectives of the Initiative

The Unite! Seed Fund is envisioned to provide financial support to innovative, co-creative and collaborative ideas in **teaching and learning, scientific research, and student activities** across the Unite! alliance. The Seed Fund intends to support the exploration and development of attractive and diverse activities and projects, to help secure either the additional funds for a project or to conduct cooperation on joint, ambitious, and innovative ideas within the alliance.

Funding Line: "Unite! Seed Fund for Research and PhD in Unite! Focus Areas" (Spring 2025)

Funding initiative for promoting innovation and collaboration in Research and PhD in Unite! in the following focus areas:

- Artificial Intelligence
- Industry 4.0
- Energy
- Entrepreneurship
- Sustainable Cities and Water[1]
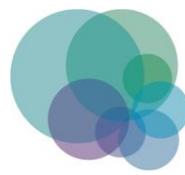- Engineering Biology[2]
- Space
- Cybersecurity

The Unite! university alliance invites **researchers and research units from at least 3 member universities** to submit proposals of collaborative projects. The funding is open to subjects and topics related to the focus areas mentioned above.

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Award Information and Timeline: Basic Data

Seed Fund programme line:	Research & PhD in Unite! Focus Areas
Maximum budget for each proposal belonging to the programme option "Exploring"	**Up to €10,000**
Maximum budget for each proposal belonging to the programme option "Developing": a) 3 participating universities b) 4 participating universities c) 5 participating universities d) 6 participating universities e) 7 participating universities f) 8 participating universities g) 9 participating universities	a) **Up to €20,000** b) **Up to €27,500** c) **Up to €35,000** d) **Up to €44,000** e) **Up to €54,000** f) **Up to €65,000** g) **Up to €80,000**
Deadline for proposals:	**20 March 2026**
Announcement of results:	**Early June 2026**
Funding period for this call:	**October 2026 – December 2027**

[1] incl. Resilient Cities and Climate Change.
[2] incl. Biotechnology.

Objectives and Purpose

- Encourage Unite! members to **jointly seize new opportunities** in research and PhD education
- **Stimulate academic collaboration** from the bottom up (in the Unite! focus areas)
- Support collaborative initiatives financially for a **fixed time** (from the Seed Fund)
- Enable Unite! members to develop **collaborative follow-up activities that intend to obtain significant funding from other major sources** (e.g., Horizon Europe, Erasmus+ or other EU and national sources), thus leveraging the seed funding.

Essentially, the seed fund intends to support the formation of **new research collaborations** and/or to further develop already active communities across **Unite! members**, specifically in the Unite! focus areas.

Potential Outputs

Programme Option "Exploring":

- Networking and establishing connections for research collaborations, particularly among Early Career Researchers (see further below, "evaluation criteria")
- Well-defined collaboration idea with outline for next steps (e.g. grant writing, joint doctorates etc.)
- Carry out other supplemental research activities within an existing research project that otherwise could not be realised due to budget limitations.
- Carry out early-stage research or exploratory studies intended to obtain more significant funding from major sources, etc.
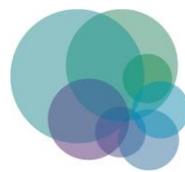
Programme Option "Developing":

- Developing joint research proposals (for specific funding schemes, e.g., MSCA doctoral networks etc.)
- Providing joint/shared offers specifically for PhD candidates or post-Docs (for the purpose of research, soft skills, career development, etc.)
- Establishing research or PhD communities with defined structures (such as research clusters or graduate schools)
- Creating a comprehensive plan to pursue external funding with identified opportunities
- Engaging in collaborative activities, such as the dissemination of research results to broader audiences, the organisation of workshops or research meetings
- Conducting field research (quantitative or qualitative) within the scope of an existing larger research project
- Carrying out a small research project within the broader scope of the aforementioned focus areas, etc.

Budgetary Guidance

Eligible costs that can be funded:

- Personnel costs* should be included with clear justification (e.g., conceptualising/preparatory work, accrediting, proposal writing, setting up conditions)
- Travel expenses (sustainable modes of travel preferred; Erasmus+ mobility schemes should be used wherever possible)
  - Travel costs must be covered (and applied for) by the universities sending students/staff to another university. The host university cannot pay travel costs of visiting students and staff.
- Other costs that can be funded include material resources, research consumables, on-site/blended workshops, external service providers (e.g., moderators, language services).

- o If you intend to purchase <u>large technical equipment</u> or replace standard equipment, please discuss with your Unite! Key Liaison Officer whether your university's regulations allow this.
- In general, overhead costs <u>cannot</u> be included in the budget plan. In case this poses problems as to the internal regulations of your institution, please contact your Unite! Key Laison Officer (KLO) as well as the Unite! Seed Fund management at seedfund@unite-university.eu.

The Seed Fund does <u>not</u> cover PhD or Post-doc stipends/grants for individuals.

<u>The proposal must make clear in which way the funded activities are additional to ongoing activities.</u>
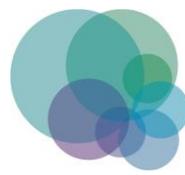
Requirements and Deliverables

- Applications must include academic staff or teachers or teaching units from **at least three full Unite! member universities.** Partners beyond Unite! can be included, but not as beneficiaries.
- Funds are expected to be managed through local coordinators within the project.
- If beneficial for the project, the Unite! **Metacampus should be used as part of the project**, and its intended use should be specified in the Seed Fund proposal. Metacampus (as part of the Unite! digital campus) is the central learning management platform for all Unite! members and can be used e.g. for trainings, workshops, teaching, and lectures. For any questions, please contact the Metacampus support team (metacampus@unite-university.eu).
- Applications must include letters of support issued by the dean of studies of the participating departments of the universities.
- For the establishment of new study programmes: Distinction from existing study programmes, presentation of the complementary added value as well as a declaration that sufficient personnel and material resources are available for the implementation and execution of the new study programme.
- A written report to the Unite! Secretariat on the progress and results of the project is due two months after the project ends (28 February 2028 at the latest).
- **Only a max. of 50% of the funding can be allocated to one partner in the project.**

Finding International Partners for Seed Fund Proposals

- A **virtual matchmaking event** will be organised with the aim of bringing into contact potential collaboration partners from the Unite! universities. Participation is recommended but not mandatory.

Date and time:	**Friday, 6 February 2026, 12:00-14:00 CET**
Registration:	https://eveeno.com/uniteseedfundresearch2026
Deadline for registration:	**Tuesday, 3 February 2026** (end of day)
Explication	It is possible to register either as a 'coordinator' (with a project idea) or as a 'partner' (who is looking for a coordinator). During the virtual meeting, there will be one breakout room per project idea, with the coordinator leading/moderating the discussion. The full list of project ideas will be shared with all registered participants after 3 February 2026.

Evaluation Criteria

1) The **overall quality** of the application, including:
   - Adequate inclusion of relevant academic expertise of the Unite! alliance
   - Realistic work plan and clear deliverables
   - Adequacy of the funding requested
2) The **sustainability and long-term perspective** of the proposal, including:
   - Credible commitment to sustained collaborative activities within Unite!
   - Clear potential for joint activities to be made permanent or scaled up
3) The potential **impact** of the proposal, including:
   - Expected added value for and impact on scientific research and PhD education
   - Expectation value (likelihood and potential benefit) of successful follow-up funding proposals and other joint activities (high-risk/high-gain proposals are possible)
   - If applicable: Potential for outreach and external dissemination of Unite!

- For the programme option "**Exploring**", applications from **Early Career Researchers[3] will be <u>preferred</u>**.[4]

Application Procedure

- Applications can be submitted **until 20 March 2026** via email to: seedfund@unite-university.eu
- It is <u>strongly recommended</u> to contact your university's Key Liaison Officer for application guidance. In case you are affiliated with <u>ULisboa</u>, contacting your Key Liaison Officer is <u>mandatory</u>. General inquiries can also be emailed to: seedfund@unite-university.eu
- It is <u>strongly recommended</u> that applications be coordinated in advance with the central administration units of the respective universities.
- **Eligible to apply:**
  - **Doctoral Researchers** (may need local coordinator who can receive funds)
  - **Early-Career Researchers** (e.g., Post-docs, Ad-hoc lecturer/professor etc.)
  - **Research Units** (i.e., Doctoral Schools/programmes, Research centres, PhD communities etc.)
  - **Tenured Researchers** (e.g., Professors, Associate Professors etc.)
- The evaluation of applications will be carried out by the Unite! Academic Forum (UAF), and selection decisions will be confirmed by the Unite! Steering Committee. Results are **expected by early June 2026.**
- **The complete application packet includes:**
  1) **Project outline** (no more than 1000 words, signatures can be on additional sheet) to be submitted as PDF, which shows how the proposed objectives will be achieved and the funding criteria fulfilled.
  2) The **budget allocation** (Excel sheet)
  3) **Eligibility checklist** (Excel sheet)
  4) **Letter of support** issued by the dean of studies of the participating departments of the universities. If you are affiliated with <u>ULisboa</u>, it is mandatory for you to contact your Key Liaison Officer for guidance as to the letter of support.
     - Only for new study programmes: a declaration that sufficient personnel and material resources are available for the implementation and execution of the new study program.
  5) Only for "Exploring" applications: Consortia of **Early Career Researchers** (see notes 3 and 4) must submit copies of their PhD certificates, as well as documentation of parental leave or comparable career interruptions, where applicable.