

Call for Submissions „Deep-tech Innovation Ecosystems“

Preamble

The non-profit Joachim Herz Foundation was established in Hamburg in 2008 and is one of Germany's major foundations. It is committed to fostering innovation and knowledge transfer from science, with the aim of accelerating the application of scientific insights and creating societal impact.

Through its funding line “Deep-tech Innovation Ecosystems”, the Foundation provides targeted impulses to strengthen deep-tech entrepreneurship and innovation ecosystems in Germany. The objective is to improve the conditions for science- and technology-driven start-ups and to make an effective contribution to strengthening academic spin-offs that create long-term societal value and serve the public good.

Deep-tech start-ups are particularly time- and capital-intensive and depend on strong innovation ecosystems in which science, technology transfer structures, entrepreneurship support, industry partners, and private and public capital are closely interconnected. In Germany, however, structural deficits persist within innovation ecosystems that hinder both the transfer of scientific knowledge and the scaling of technology-intensive start-ups. This funding line directly addresses these structural challenges.

1. Objectives and Thematic Focus

The objective of the funding line is to support innovative projects that improve the institutional and systemic framework conditions for transferring scientific knowledge, thereby strengthening science- and technology-driven deep-tech start-ups and building robust structures for knowledge transfer and start-up support within German innovation ecosystems. To date, many promising technologies remain trapped in the so-called “valley of death”—the phase between scientific discovery, technological maturity, and market-ready application. Systematically addressing the key structural challenges associated with this transition is therefore essential to bringing more innovations successfully into application. Funding is provided to projects that specifically address selected problem areas currently constraining the potential of deep-tech entrepreneurship in Germany with convincing solution concepts. The funding is intended to be deployed in a targeted manner to create impulses within the deep-tech innovation ecosystem that can achieve long-term systemic impact. The following sections outline exemplary structural challenges. This overview is intended as guidance and is explicitly not exhaustive; project proposals may also address additional challenges affecting deep-tech innovation ecosystems.

The funding line is explicitly open to projects that address and further develop deficits in the orchestration of innovation ecosystems, particularly through the active involvement of key regional actors from science, industry, capital, policy, and the start-up community.

Additionally, persistent gaps in entrepreneurship programming may be addressed—ranging from early-stage awareness building to structured training and mentoring for researchers—

as well as insufficient access to physical and digital infrastructure for deep-tech entrepreneurs, particularly in the transition from laboratory-scale development to demonstration and pilot phases. In many regions, these challenges continue to impede the development of deep-tech start-ups.

This is closely linked to a lack of institutional anchoring of entrepreneurship within the research and higher-education system, including inadequate incentive structures for researchers and, in some cases, insufficient professionalisation and standardisation of spin-off processes and related advisory services.

Further challenges arise from the limited national and international visibility and networking of German institutions and their innovation potential, particularly outside major metropolitan areas. In many regions, existing scientific excellence remains underutilised due to insufficient ecosystem density, critical mass, and professionalisation. At the same time, additional potential could be unlocked through targeted specialisation based on regional strengths and enhanced inter-regional division of labour.

Additional structural barriers exist at the fragmented interfaces between science, industry, capital, and markets, which hinder effective resource sharing and the scaling of innovations. In particular, projects may focus on strengthening systematic linkages with industrial users for evidence-based technology validation, developing pathways for international market access, and improving structured access to growth capital—without relying on direct investment funding.

The funding programme prioritises initiatives that make a systemic contribution to the further development of innovation ecosystems, have model character (scalability and transferability), demonstrate strong deep-tech relevance, and address clearly defined target groups. These target groups include, in particular, researchers, deep-tech start-up teams, technology-transfer and innovation units, and other key ecosystem actors.

The call for proposals is format-open. Funding may be awarded to projects that make a measurable contribution to strengthening deep-tech entrepreneurship while simultaneously advancing relevant structures within innovation ecosystems.

This includes, in particular, initiatives that:

- develop and implement new or improved deep-tech entrepreneurship formats, and qualify relevant actors and founders with specific deep-tech-related competencies, empower them to pursue entrepreneurial activities, and connect them effectively;
- accelerate and systematise transfer pathways for research-intensive technologies; structurally strengthen collaboration within innovation ecosystems between science, technology transfer, industry, and capital;
- professionalise and strategically specialise regional or thematic innovation ecosystems; and enhance the (international) visibility, networking, and market access of deep-tech innovations.

Project proposals must clearly demonstrate which structural bottleneck in the transfer of scientific knowledge they address and how the proposed measures will sustainably enhance the performance of the regional or national deep-tech innovation ecosystem.

2. Target Group and Application Requirements

We are seeking changemakers with expertise, energy, and passion who are committed to advancing innovation and competitiveness through deep-tech entrepreneurship and contributing to the improvement of institutional and systemic framework conditions for the transfer of scientific knowledge. Eligible applicants include German higher-education institutions, tax-privileged research organisations, public-law bodies, and non-profit organisations with a strong link to deep-tech entrepreneurship and innovation ecosystems.

Applicants must demonstrate strong thematic alignment through a convincing project concept, proven subject-matter expertise, relevant experience in implementing comparable initiatives, and robust networks within the innovation ecosystem. In addition, a coherent organisational and governance structure as well as a compelling strategy for long-term impact are expected. Further details are provided under the evaluation criteria in Section 4.

3. Subject of Funding

For programmes that contribute to improving institutional and systemic framework conditions for the transfer of scientific knowledge, the Joachim Herz Foundation provides funding of up to EUR 1,000,000 per project. Funding is strictly limited to structural measures and does not include direct support for individual economic activities or companies.

Eligible for funding are projects whose programme focus is on pre-competitive, science-related and structural transfer activities, for example in the areas of qualification and skills development, network building, governance, platforms, transfer formats, cooperation and orchestration services, as well as the institutional anchoring of entrepreneurship within the higher-education and research system. In particular, project-related personnel and material costs, as well as costs for events and other implementation-related project measures, are eligible for funding. General administrative overhead costs of the participating institutions are not eligible for funding. Projects that aim at the exclusive allocation or commercial exploitation of research results by individual companies are excluded from funding.

The funding period is up to three years per project and depends on the project proposal submitted. Funding is provided by the Joachim Herz Foundation on the basis of a funding 6.

4. Criteria and Requirements

To be considered for funding, applicants must meet the following requirements:

Systemic Contribution to Deep-tech Innovation Ecosystems

The project clearly addresses identified systemic bottlenecks within deep-tech entrepreneurship innovation ecosystems in Germany, for example in the areas of governance and orchestration, programme design and infrastructure, interfaces with capital, industry, and markets, or international visibility. The project team demonstrates a profound understanding of the challenges addressed and the capability to implement viable solutions. Priority is given to initiatives that explicitly target the specific requirements of deep-tech entrepreneurship, in particular science-based start-ups grounded in intellectual property and characterised by long development cycles and high capital intensity.

Mature Project Concept with Clear Value Proposition and Defined Target Groups

The proposed initiative presents a convincing and well-developed project concept with the potential to substantially improve existing transfer activities and deep-tech entrepreneurship. The project follows a clear logic linking problem definition, impact hypothesis, and target vision, and articulates a tangible value proposition for clearly defined target groups. A sound and balanced financing concept for the entire funding period is required. Regional specificities must be taken into account, and the expertise of relevant stakeholders must be systematically integrated into both planning and implementation.

Subject-Matter Excellence and Team Quality

The Foundation deliberately focuses on strong teams and the individuals responsible for implementation. It seeks funding projects carried out by excellent and ambitious teams. Proven expertise in technology transfer and entrepreneurship is present within the project team, supported by a robust track record of previously implemented projects and demonstrable successes. Funding is explicitly intended for initiatives that go beyond conceptual work and focus on concrete implementation.

Degree of Innovation of the Programme

In line with the Foundation's guiding principle "Der Start ist das Ziel" ("The starting point is the goal"), this funding line is specifically addressed to innovative programmes that explore new approaches and set targeted impulses within the German innovation ecosystem through ambitious programmes and pilot projects. The piloting and contextual adaptation of international best practices to the German deep-tech context are explicitly encouraged.

Networks and Connectivity within the Innovation Ecosystem

Embedding the project within a strong innovation ecosystem with relevant partners is essential. A resilient network of practice and ecosystem partners with appropriate subject-matter and regional expertise is required to ensure effective implementation and the sustainable use of project results. The proposal must follow a clear ecosystem logic and

demonstrate how connectivity and synergies with existing initiatives will be ensured. Engagement with the funding portfolio of the Joachim Herz Foundation is welcomed.

Impact Potential and Scalability

The Foundation seeks projects with clear and credible impact potential for deep-tech entrepreneurship and innovation. A realistic impact measurement framework with defined objectives, indicators, and milestones must be presented. Regular reviews, learning-oriented iterations, and structured knowledge and results transfer into the innovation ecosystem are expected. Scaling project results beyond the funding period in order to maximise impact is explicitly encouraged.

Institutional Commitment

The prospective funding partner, the project team, and all participating applicant organisations demonstrate clear and documented institutional support, particularly with regard to governance arrangements, resource allocation, and strategic integration within their respective institutions.

Societal Relevance

The programme delivers a societally relevant contribution by enabling more research outcomes to be translated into practical application.

Explicit Exclusion Criteria

Activities that do not meet the requirements of non-profit orientation are explicitly excluded. This includes, in particular, programmes aimed at the direct financing of companies, initiatives that combine funding integrally with investment instruments, purely market-driven product development activities, or measures that grant exclusive advantages to individual start-ups.

5. Application Guide

A comprehensive application guide, including detailed information on the required documentation, is available on our website. Submitted applications must follow the structure of the application guide.

6. Selection Process

All submitted project proposals will be reviewed by the Joachim Herz Foundation for formal eligibility and alignment with the objectives of this call. The selection of funding partners with the most promising proposals will be carried out by an expert jury in a two-stage procedure:

– Stage 1: Written application

Interested applicants must submit their application via the Joachim Herz Foundation's online application portal by 14th of June 2026 (see application guide for further details).

– Stage 2: Project pitch

Following a positive evaluation of the written application, shortlisted organisations will be invited by the 24th of July 2026 to present their project in person at a pitch session to be held in Hamburg in August 2026 (calendar week 34).

The final funding decision will be made after the pitch presentations. The jury appointed by the Joachim Herz Foundation consists of renowned experts with outstanding achievements, extensive subject-matter expertise, and proven experience in knowledge transfer within the thematic focus of the call. The final decision rests with the Joachim Herz Foundation, based on the assessments and recommendations of the expert jury.

7. Dates

until 14. Juni 2026

- ▶ Application period

30. April 2026

- ▶ Digital Info-Session, please register [here](#)

July 2026

- ▶ Selection and notification of finalists

August 2026

- ▶ Pitches in Hamburg in calendar week 34
- ▶ Selection of funding partners

until December 2026

- ▶ Finalisation of contracts between funding partner and Joachim Herz Foundation

8. Contact

For further information, please contact Dr. Max Vellguth (mvellguth@joachim-herz-stiftung.de).