Digital Europe Programme (DIGITAL)

Call for proposals

Advanced Digital Skills

(DIGITAL-2025-SKILLS-08)

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EUROPEAN HEALTH AND DIGITAL EXECUTIVE AGENCY (HaDEA)

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CALL FOR PROPOSALS

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0. Introduction

This is a call for proposals for EU action grants in the field of advanced digital skills under the Digital Europe Programme (DIGITAL).

The regulatory framework for this EU Funding Programme is set out in:

- Regulation 2024/2509 ([EU Financial Regulation](#))[1]

- the basic act (Digital Europe Regulation [2021/694](#)[2]).

The call is launched in accordance with the 2025 - 2027 Work Programme[3] and will be managed by the European Health and Digital Executive Agency (HaDEA) (**'Agency'**).

The call covers the following topics:

- DIGITAL-2025-SKILLS-08-QUANTUM-ACADEMY-STEP — Sectoral digital skills academies: Quantum Skills Digital Academy

- DIGITAL-2025-SKILLS-08-GENAI-ACADEMY-STEP — Sectoral digital skills academies: Digital Skills Academy in GenAI

- DIGITAL-2025-SKILLS-08-VIRTUAL-WORLDS-ACADEMY-STEP — Sectoral digital skills academies: Virtual Worlds Skills Academy

Each project application under the call must address only one of these topics. Applicants wishing to apply for more than one topic, must submit a separate proposal under each topic.

The Topic DIGITAL-2025-SKILLS-08-GENAI-ACADEMY-STEP is linked with the Advanced Digital Skills (AI factories) topic of the Digital Europe Programme, under a call with estimated publication in Q4 of 2025. The grants under both topics will be managed as linked actions[4]. The participants of both actions must conclude a collaboration agreement[5].

We invite you to read the call documentation carefully, and in particular this Call document, the Model Grant Agreement, the [EU Funding & Tenders Portal Online Manual](#) and the [EU Grants AGA — Annotated Grant Agreement](#).

These documents provide clarifications and answers to questions you may have when preparing your application:

- the [Call document](#) outlines the:

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[1] Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2024/2509 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 September **2024 on the financial rules applicable to the general budget of the Union (recast) ('EU Financial Regulation') (**OJ L, 2024/2509, 26.9.2024).

[2] Regulation (EU) 2021/694 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 29 April 2021 establishing the Digital Europe Programme (OJ L 166, 11.5.2021, p. 1).

[3] Commission Implementing Decision [C/2025/1839 final] of [28 March] concerning the adoption of the multiannual work programme for 2025 - 2027 and the financing decision for the implementation of the Digital Europe Programme).

[4] As indicated on [AGA](#), page 29, Linked actions are used when the granting authority wishes to establish a formal link between your action and other activities, that may for example complement, precede or succeed your project. The linked action is identified in the Grant Agreement and may refer to any formally set-up activity, such as other EU grants. The beneficiaries of both actions must have arrangements, to ensure that both actions are implemented and coordinated properly. If required by the granting authority, these arrangements must be set out in a written collaboration agreement.

[5] More information on the collaboration agreement for linked actions can be found in Annotated Grant Agreement [AGA.](#)

- background, objectives, scope, outcomes and deliverables, KPIs to measure outcomes and deliverables, targeted stakeholders, type of action and funding rate and specific topic conditions (sections 1 and 2)

- timetable and available budget (sections 3 and 4)

- admissibility and eligibility conditions (including mandatory documents; sections 5 and 6)

- criteria for financial and operational capacity and exclusion (section 7)

- evaluation and award procedure (section 8)

- award criteria (section 9)

- legal and financial set-up of the Grant Agreements (section 10)

- how to submit an application (section 11).

- the Online Manual outlines the:

  - procedures to register and submit proposals online via the EU Funding & Tenders Portal (**'Portal'**)

  - recommendations for the preparation of the application.

- the AGA — Annotated Grant Agreement contains:

  - detailed annotations on all the provisions in the Grant Agreement you will have to sign in order to obtain the grant *(including cost eligibility, payment schedule, accessory obligations, etc)*.

You are also encouraged to visit the Digital Skills and Jobs Platform[6] to consult the list of projects funded previously.

Recognising the importance of Strategic Technologies for the Union's economic security[7], this call supports the strengthening of deployment of critical technologies, such as AI, across industry and value chains, further fostering deep tech innovations with significant economic potential. Consequently, a STEP Seal will be awarded to applicants that passed all evaluation thresholds, including the proposals that remain unfunded due to budget limitations in the Digital Europe Program.

1. Background

Europe needs people with advanced digital skills to develop, deploy and use cutting edge digital technologies and infrastructures that support its competitiveness, digital sovereignty and digital and green transition. One of the Digital Decade targets is to significantly increase the number of information and communication technology (ICT) specialists in Europe by 2030, while promoting the access of women to this field and increasing the number of ICT graduates. Moreover, tackling the digital skills gaps is **crucial to boost Europe's competitiveness. The actions of this call will contribute to the** Competitiveness Compass by improving the conditions for creating the necessary pool of skilled digital experts as well as to the establishment of a Union of Skills, focused **on investment, adult and lifelong learning, skill retention and circulation.**

To contribute to the EU's goals of tackling the existing gap in advanced digital skills and increase the digital talent pool, four new digital skills academies will be established in key digital areas (quantum, GenAI/AI factories, semiconductors and virtual worlds).

Those digital skills academies will be centred around three main pillars: i) knowledge, education, and training; ii) building the ecosystem, and iii) measuring progress.

This call covers three digital skills academies[8]: a) Quantum Skills Digital Academy; b) Digital Skills Academy in GenAI and c) Virtual World Skills Academy.

a) Quantum technologies have the potential to accelerate the creation of imminent solutions to global societal challenges and drive economic growth. In order to position the EU as a global leader in the development of quantum technologies, to stimulate their industrial applications, and to support the growth of the European quantum ecosystem, interdisciplinary training in quantum physics, engineering and computing is needed, especially for domain professionals who do not necessarily have a background in quantum physics or engineering. The Quantum Skills Digital Academy will offer tailored training opportunities at different levels that <u>bridge the gap between traditional disciplines and quantum technologies.</u>

b) **AI and generative AI ('GenAI') have** the capability to boost productivity to a degree unseen since past technological revolutions, introducing unprecedented efficiencies and revolutionizing workflows across industries and sectors. For the EU to unlock this economic potential and adapt to the changing demand of the job market, an urgent update of the skillset of the European workforce is essential. The AI Skills Academy will establish a cross-sectoral academy in Artificial Intelligence with the aim to address the current and future AI skills gap[9] **in the EU's** most strategic sectors. The Academy will strengthen the pool of AI specialists, particularly in the field of Generative AI (GenAI) development and application.

c) Virtual worlds are a fast-evolving technology, gaining ground in more and more areas of our lives. By blending physical and digital worlds in real-time, they bring unprecedented opportunities. For the society, for example, they can enhance health services, make education and training more captivating, stimulate interaction and collaboration among people, or provide immersive cultural experiences. In many industrial areas, virtual worlds can help, for example, with optimising production, increasing safety, improving predictability or boosting creative processes. But the scarcity of professionals with suitable profiles prevents more rapid advancements in the development and uptake of virtual worlds. Across the EU, education and training programmes dedicated to preparing ICT specialists and workforce to engage with virtual worlds appear to be insufficient to meet the market demand. The overarching objective of the Virtual Worlds Skills Academy is to reinforce the talent pool **needed to attain EU's ambitions of technological sovereignty and competitiveness.**

It is utmost important to note that for all three topics under this call, the funded project will be requested to collect data from the participants of the training programmes related to the performance indicators set by the Digital Europe Programme, for Specific Objective 4, area of Advanced Digital Skill[10], namely:

– Indicator 1: Persons who have received training to acquire advanced digital skills;

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[8] AI factories call is foreseen to be published in Q4 2025.

[9] The DEP coordination and support action LEADS performed a skills demand analysis, programme and courses mapping, and a gap analysis of the advance digital skills in Europe, and its findings show high current and future demands for specialist in key digital areas (for more information see the <u>DEMAND FORECAST DASHBOARD</u>, <u>LEADS Final ADS Demand and Forecast Report</u> and <u>LEADS Gap Analysis</u>).

[10] <u>Regulation - 2021/694 - EN - EUR-Lex</u>

- Indicator 3: People reporting improved employment situation after the end of the training supported by the Programme.

Therefore, the necessary monitoring and data collection mechanisms need to be planned and budgeted in the proposal.

2. Objectives — Scope — Outcomes and deliverables — KPIs to measure outcomes and deliverables — Targeted stakeholders — Type of action and funding rate — Specific topic conditions

DIGITAL-2025-SKILLS-08-QUANTUM-ACADEMY-STEP — Sectoral digital skills academies: Quantum Skills Digital Academy

Objectives

This topic aims to establish a sectoral academy in quantum. The objective of the Quantum Skills Digital Academy is to serve as a single, central contact point and to provide specialised quantum technologies training and hands on experience at different quantum education levels. It will play an important role in contributing to the objectives of the European Declaration on Quantum Technologies in the domain of quantum skills development and training[11].

The academy will complement the existing EU-funded actions (DIGITAL-2021-SKILLS-01, DIGITAL-2022-TRAINING-02, HORIZON-EUROHPC-JU-2023-QEC-05-01)[12] and initiatives in the area of quantum education and training, and leverage industry to close the talent gap[13] in the EU and strengthen the pool of specialists by actively participating in educational material preparation and training offer opportunities.

The academy will also identify gaps in existing academic and training activities in the quantum sector, develop new opportunities, scale up successful examples and create a quantum education ecosystem in the EU to improve its capacity to nurture and attract talents. It will thus tackle both the supply side of the training offer by proposing up-to date and flexible education and training pathways to reinforce the number of specialists and the demand side by promoting the uptake of trainings.

Moreover, the academy will act as a catalyst for industry to promote careers in the quantum technologies sector, including by promoting the access of women.

The academy is also expected to closely collaborate with the EU-funded umbrella action[14] that will coordinate and foster collaboration among sectoral academies and initiatives, as well as with the European Advanced Digital Skills Competitions[15] project that will support the design, manage and run the quantum competition. Additionally, close collaboration will be established with the individual projects in quantum funded under the different topics of SO4[16], as well as other EU programmes like the Quantum Flagship[17]. The academy will further build synergies and complementarities with other

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[11] https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/european-declaration-quantum-technologies
[12] DIGITAL Projects brochure
[13] The DEP coordination and support action LEADS performed a skills demand analysis, programme and courses mapping, and a gap analysis of the advance digital skills in Europe, and its findings show high current and future demands for specialist in key digital areas (for more information see the DEMAND FORECAST DASHBOARD, LEADS Final ADS Demand and Forecast Report and LEADS Gap Analysis).
[14] See topic 4.3 of the Digital Europe Programme Work Programme 2025-2027
[15] Topic 4.4 of the Digital Europe Programme Work Programme 2025-2027
[16] In particular awarded projects of the topics Specialised Education programmes in key capacity areas (2021-2024), Short-term training courses in key capacity areas (2022) and the Advanced digital skills analysis (2023).
[17] https://qt.eu

EU funding programmes and existing education and training initiatives such as the EIT Campus, the EIT Community AI and the Deep Tech Talent Initiative (DTTI), the Erasmus+ European Universities Alliances, Alliances for Innovation and Centres of Vocational Excellence, their possible follow-up initiatives, and the Large-Scale Partnerships under the Pact for Skills.

The academy will support and strengthen the EU's strategic needs and technological sovereignty.

Scope

Proposals are expected to focus on the following activities as listed under the three pillars below:

Pillar 1: Knowledge, Education, and Training

– Collaboration with academia, training institutions, the research community, and industry partners to design and deliver educational programmes and self-standing training modules in an interdisciplinary approach addressing training and skills gaps in the EU in quantum technologies, covering both technical and non-technical profiles.

– The programmes to be designed and delivered include common curricula at ISCED levels 7 (Master's or equivalent level) or 8 (doctoral or equivalent level) leading to a degree, which use the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). The consortium should design and deliver at least one educational programme at level 7 or 8. The consortium should clearly indicate in the proposal the number and level of the degree(s)/programme cycle(s) to be developed/delivered. Additionally, it is left to the consortium to determine and explore if single or joint degree will be delivered (to consider the Blueprint for a European Degree[18]).

– Design and delivery of a number of self-standing training modules, aimed at both students and professionals from different sectors, academia, start-ups, and SMEs as well as the public sector, including public administrators and education professionals. The consortium should clearly indicate in the proposal the number of self-standing training module(s) to be developed. Professional training design should take into account the European Approach to Microcredentials[19].

– Organisation of tutorials and hands-on activities for non-quantum experts to gain practical experience on a quantum device and development of activities like summer schools that enable STEM students who do not have quantum mechanics or quantum related subjects in their curricula to acquire specialised knowledge in quantum technologies.

– Facilitation and promotion of practical experience, such as internships, fellowships, work placements, laboratory experiences, and twinning opportunities. Development of interactive simulations, lab kits, and teaching aids specific to quantum education in order to understand abstract quantum concepts. Practical experience will be integrated to the designed curricula, either the delivered educational programme(s) or the self-standing training modules, if applicable.

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[18] https://education.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2024-03/European_Degree_Communication_Graphic_Version_EN.pdf
[19] A European approach to micro-credentials - European Education Area

The topic 4.3 of the Digital Europe Work Programme 2025-2027[20], the awarded project of the ELEVATE: European League of Advanced Digital Skills Academies will develop a framework for a certification mechanism of modular learning credentials to provide a seal of quality/accreditation of excellence for advanced digital skills training. The academy is expected to coordinate with this action and pilot and implement the seal of quality/accreditation of excellence for all the training modules they offer.

Proposals with high ambitions in terms of the number of students trained and successful completion of the educational programme(s), self-standing training module(s) as well as delivering excellent programmes, modules and trainings are likely to be assessed more positively. Additionally, proposals delivering their activities in several Member States are likely to have more added value.

Pillar 2: Building the Ecosystem

(a) Building the Ecosystem

- Establishing partnerships and collaboration frameworks between academia, industry (including SMEs), and research institutions to facilitate and promote the large-scale European-wide roll-out of academic programmes and short or longer-term trainings.

- Facilitating joint (practical) educational initiatives and events with industry, such as on-the-job experiences in companies' premises, mentorship schemes, internship programs, summer schools, bootcamps, visits to facilities, career days.

- Implementing support, integration, and visibility schemes with particular attention to the participation of female students and female professionals in education and training activities, as well as talented young people from less quantum-developed regions and people with disabilities. Additional emphasis should be made to attract students from countries with whom the European Commission has ongoing international cooperation related to digital topics (e.g. digital partnerships, trade and technology councils, policy dialogues, Talent Growth Task Force)[21].

- Designing and delivering training initiatives for teaching staff, such as 'Teach-the-Teacher' modules for university and secondary education instructors, are highly recommended. To further enhance their skills, organizing visits to quantum laboratories will provide valuable firsthand experience, allowing them to convey more effectively knowledge to students.

(b) Scaling Up and Dissemination

- Organising communication and awareness-raising activities, e.g., through social media, including career orientation activities or "technology deep dive sessions" targeted at secondary education students and the general public.

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[20] See topic 4.3 of the DEP WP 2025-2027.
[21] The European Union currently has four digital partnerships, with Japan, Korea, Singapore and Canada **Digital Partnerships | Shaping Europe's digital future (europa.eu). A Trade and Technology Council** (TTC) is established between the EU and the United States (US) and the EU and India. The EU and the US additionally launched a Talent for Growth Task Force that supports training from the US and the EU. The EU cooperates with many countries, international organisations and multilateral fora to represent **Europe's interests and actively promote the benefits of the EU's digital strategy. International** cooperations, unlocking the benefits of digital transformation around the world, are conducted with countries from Eastern Europe, Western Balkans, Mediterranean, Africa and so forth (Foreign policy | Shaping Europe's digital future (europa.eu).

– Collaborating between Member States and eligible third countries in outreach activities and exchange of best practices.

– Creating a dedicated landing page integrated in the Digital Skills and Jobs Platform, where all activities, events, and initiatives of the academy are disseminated.

To increase the impact and ensure the continued delivery of the designed educational and training programmes, the proposals are expected to foster as wide as possible the dissemination and promotion of the designed curricula in the main European Universities and Technological Institutes. Furthermore, the academy will engage the education ecosystem to scale up existing education and training offers (for example the higher education programmes funded under DIGITAL) and make them available throughout Europe. Active collaboration and inputs from industry must be sought for all activities.

Pillar 3: Measuring progress

It is expected that the academy will develop a robust methodology to monitor the evolution of the labour market and the progress achieved in closing the respective skills gaps. Therefore, activities could include the definition and monitoring of relevant indicators to better address the needs and directed funds towards achieving them. EU measurement frameworks such as the Reports on the Digital Decade[22] will be taken into account, as well as relevant data infrastructures such as the Common European Data Space for Skills[23]. Based on this progress monitoring, the academies should suggest and implement adjustments to their activities accordingly.

Proposals are highly encouraged to cover the following points explicitly under the RELEVANCE criterion:

– Alignment with EU's strategic needs and technological sovereignty: The academy should demonstrate how it will support and strengthen the EU's strategic needs and technological sovereignty in the field of quantum technologies.

– Complementarity with existing actions and initiatives: The academy should demonstrate how it will complement existing actions and initiatives in quantum technologies.

– Interdisciplinary approach: The academy should demonstrate its ability to integrate quantum physics, computer science, and engineering in its educational programs and activities.

– Variety of educational and training activities:

– organise educational activities and events with industry and provide training opportunities (e.g. summer schools, internships, hands-on exercises)

– develop training programmes *for teachers, business profiles and decision makers*

Proposals are highly encouraged to cover the following points explicitly under the IMPLEMENTATION criterion:

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22   [Report on the state of the Digital Decade 2024 | Shaping Europe's digital future](#)
23   [EU Funding & Tenders Portal](#)

- Gap analysis, innovation and scalability: The academy should identify gaps in existing academic and training offers in quantum technologies and propose new, scalable, and effective innovative solutions to address these gaps building upon the current knowledge. Describe how these gaps in quantum education will be identified, analysed, and considered in the proposal. Explain how new developments and trends will be taken into account in the design of the educational material, and how this material will be updated and aligned with the industry needs in a dynamic way.

- Describe the details of the awarded degree(s), what actions will be developed in order to have standardised curricula across Europe and the type of certification awarded for self-standing training module(s).

- Briefly describe how the programme(s) and self-standing training module(s) will be co-designed jointly between members of the consortium (in particular between higher education institutions and industry partners).

- Broadly explain how the programme(s) and self-standing training module(s) will be structured, including describing the main content of the proposed curricula, as well as a description of the practice-oriented components (internships, summer schools etc).

- Describe the planned activities to attract highly qualified experts in quantum technologies from both the public and the private sector and support their mobility if needed. Explain how student mobility between higher education institutions is encouraged and how complementarity and coordination with other mobility programmes (in particular Erasmus+) is achieved.

- If applicable, explain how students will be financially supported to participate to the programme(s), self-standing training modules (e.g. via scholarships, fee waivers or others), and especially to acquire practical experience either with members of the consortium or with companies and organisations outside the consortium (e.g. via internships, fellowships or short-term job placements). This support can take the form of Financial Support to Third Parties.

- If applicable, explain if and how digital solutions, equipment and infrastructure will be purchased/leased/shared among institutions to ensure that programme(s) and self-standing training module(s) have the necessary facilities to deliver excellence.

Proposals are highly encouraged to cover the following points explicitly under the IMPACT criterion:

- Describe the communication and dissemination activities, particularly targeting **high school pupils, Bachelor's/Master's students as well as the workforce** already employed or will be employed in the quantum sector to raise awareness regarding the programme(s) and self-standing module(s).

- Describe how information about the programme(s) and self-standing module(s) are published on online platforms that provide information on **available education offers, including programmes' details (e.g. name,** description, list of courses, length, field of study in which the course is taught, etc.) and institution details (e.g. name of the university, country).

- Describe the potential for scalability and replicability of the proposed activities.

- Describe the initiatives for raising awareness, regarding the potential of quantum technologies to transform many sectors in everyday life, to the general public and especially at high schools.

- Sectoral ecosystem creation: The academy should demonstrate its ability to improve the capacity to nurture and attract talent in quantum technologies. Initiatives to coordinate outreach activities in EU countries targeting high school students are highly encouraged.

- Industry leverage: The academy should demonstrate its ability to leverage industry to promote careers, including promoting the access of women.

- Access and equity: The academy should demonstrate its ability to extend quantum education to underrepresented groups and regions with limited resources.

Outcomes and deliverables

The Quantum Skills Academy will produce the following set of deliverables:

- Comprehensive academic curricula designed across different levels of quantum technologies education (according to the European Competence Framework for Quantum technologies) and for different target groups, implemented at European level.

- Self-standing training modules curricula designed and piloted trough relevant training courses at regional or local levels, including targeted training for SMEs and public sector.

- All training materials of the academic curricula and the self-standing training modules need to be developed in English for accessibility reasons. The use of any other additional languages is welcome.

- Partnerships and collaboration frameworks established between academia, training institutions, industry (including SMEs) and research institutions to facilitate and promote the large-scale European-wide roll-out of the academic programmes and self-standing training modules. Joint (practical) educational initiatives and events with industry facilitated, such as on-the-job experiences **in companies' premises, mentorship schemes, internship programmes,** summer schools, bootcamps, visits to facilities, career days.

- Support, integration, and visibility schemes implemented, with particular attention aimed at the participation of female students and female professionals in education and training activities, as well as talented young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and people with disabilities.

- **Training initiatives addressing teaching staff, such as "Teach**-the-**teacher"** training modules targeted at university and secondary-education teachers developed and implemented.

- Different communication and awareness-raising activities carried out, e.g. **through social media, including career orientation activities or "technology deep dive sessions" targeted at secondary education students and the general** public.

- A dedicated landing page integrated in the Digital Skills and Jobs Platform, where all activities, events and initiatives of the academy are disseminated.

- A sustainability strategy developed and agreed by the consortium for enabling the continuity of the educational programme(s) and self-standing training **module(s) after the funded project's lifetime.**

- Reports prepared **on the impact of the academies' activities, based on a KPI** assessment scheme, and recommendations for policy and investments.

KPIs to measure outcomes and deliverables

Compulsory KPIs to be included in the proposal. Include estimated targets for those KPIs that are measured in numbers or percentages (e.g. for KPI 1). These KPIs will be essential for monitoring and reporting throughout the lifetime of the project.

1. Number of participants in training programmes: Tracking the number of students, professionals, and industry experts who participate in the academy's different training programmes.

2. Increase in quantum technology-related skills: Measuring the increase in skills related to quantum technologies among participants, using surveys, assessments, or certifications and the European Competence Framework for Quantum technologies.

3. Number of training programmes delivered: Tracking the number of training programmes delivered, including online and offline courses, workshops, and summer schools.

4. Number of students and professionals from underrepresented groups: Tracking the number of students and professionals from underrepresented groups (e.g. women, minorities, people with disabilities) who participate in the academy's training programmes.

5. Industry uptake of trained professionals: Measuring the number of trained professionals who are employed in the quantum industry or related fields.

6. Number of knowledge transfer activities: Tracking the number of knowledge transfer activities, including workshops, conferences, and other events, that are organized and delivered by the academy.

7. Survey satisfaction rates: Tracking the satisfaction rates of participants on the educational material, trainers, and industry partners through surveys, to ensure that the academy's training programmes meet their needs and expectations.

Additional KPIs that may be added to proposals are:

1. Number of partnerships established: Tracking the number of partnerships between academia, industry, and research institutions that are established or strengthened through the academy.

2. **Number of research and development projects benefited from the academy's** activities/deliverables: Tracking the number of research and development projects in quantum computing, quantum simulation, quantum communication, and quantum sensing and metrology that are supported or accelerated through the academy (better access to talents recruitment and/or enhancement of the human resources via traineeships).

3. Financial impact: Measuring the financial impact of the academy's activities, including the number of jobs created.

Targeted stakeholders

The participating consortium members should demonstrate complementary roles in the proposal and demonstrate an outstanding track record in their respective fields. The consortium is highly recommended to include at least three degree awarding higher education institutions from three different eligible countries and two industry partners from eligible countries.

The consortium is also encouraged to include at least one higher education institution or research and technology organisation (RTO) from Member States widening countries[24].

Particular attention should be given to:

– Inclusion of industry partners, in particular start-ups and SMEs, but also other public or private entities that can be instrumental for the delivery of the actions requested by this call topic;

– Close collaboration with other stakeholders that provide technical expertise and experimentation and testing facilities.

Type of action and funding rate

Lump Sum Grants — 50% funding rate

For more information on Digital Europe types of action, *see Annex 1.*

Specific topic conditions

– For this topic, multi-beneficiary applications are mandatory and specific conditions for the consortium composition apply *(see section 6)*

– For this topic, the following reimbursement option for equipment costs applies: depreciation cost only *(see section 10).* The lump sum for equipment costs should be calculated with depreciation costs in the detailed budget table.

– For this topic, financial support to third parties is allowed *(see section 10)*

– The following parts of the award criteria in section 9 are exceptionally NOT applicable for this topic:

– extent to which the project would reinforce and secure the digital technology supply chain in the Union*

– extent to which the proposal can overcome financial obstacles such as the lack of market finance*

– extent to which the proposal addresses environmental sustainability and the European Green Deal goals, in terms of direct effects and/or in awareness of environmental effects*

DIGITAL-2025-SKILLS-08-GENAI-ACADEMY-STEP — Sectoral digital skills academies: Digital Skills Academy in GenAI

Objectives

This topic aims to establish an academy in Artificial Intelligence (AI): the **"AI Skills Academy".**

The AI Skills Academy will be a one-stop-shop for a range of activities supporting or developing educational and training schemes in two main focus areas: (1) skills

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for the uptake and deployment of AI and in particular 'GenAI' in key economic sectors; (2) skills related to the development and deployment of AI models in the **'AI Factories' facilities.** This call covers only the establishment of the first part of the AI Skills Academy, focused on AI and GenAI. Another call will be organised at a later stage to cover specific skillset necessary for the AI Factories. The two projects selected to implement the AI Skills Academy will closely collaborate to ensure an aligned education and training offer and to support its implementation. They will also share communication and dissemination activities. The precise scope of the collaboration should be laid down in the collaboration agreement[25] that the two projects will sign once both parts of the AI Skills Academy are set up.

The main objective of this first part of the AI Skills Academy is to address the current and future AI skills gap[26] **in the EU's** strategic sectors and strengthen the pool of AI specialists, particularly in the field of Generative AI (GenAI) development and application. To do so, the AI Skills Academy (in short, the Academy) will leverage the collaboration between industry, higher education, and vocational training institutions to skill, up-skill and re-skill students and professionals and facilitate their positioning in the EU labour market, matching their expertise with the needs of the AI market, and of EU industries and the public sector. This will contribute to increasing the overall competitiveness of the EU industries and the efficiency of the public sector.

The Academy will additionally focus on boosting the AI and GenAI competences and job-placement of underrepresented groups in the AI workforce, particularly of women[27] and on promoting AI-related opportunities for students, professionals and the broader public, targeting also Europeans living abroad.

By supporting the advancement, wider application, and adoption of AI, and particularly GenAI, the Academy will support the implementation of the AI Innovation Package[28]. With its sectoral approach, focusing on the application of AI and GenAI in key economic sectors, the Academy is also aligned with the objective of the Apply AI Strategy, announced in the Political Guidelines of the President of the European Commission 2024-2029[29]. This Strategy will boost new industrial uses of AI and improve the delivery of a variety of public services, such as healthcare.

Finally, the Academy will contribute to realising the skill targets of the Digital Decade Policy Programme[30], including, among others, reaching 20 million ICT specialists in the EU by 2030 while promoting women in the ICT sector and increasing the number of ICT graduates.

The AI Skills Academy will be part of a series of digital academies funded by the Digital Europe Programme (DIGITAL). As such, it will closely collaborate with the EU-funded umbrella action[31] that will support, coordinate, and build synergies between

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[25] The Collaboration agreement will be signed between the two projects selected to implement the AI Skills Academy and will ensure the bidirectional collaboration between them. See page 141 and 142 of the AGA for more information.

[26] The DEP coordination and support action LEADS performed a skills demand analysis, programme and courses mapping, and a gap analysis of the advance digital skills in Europe, and its findings show high current and future demands for specialist in key digital areas (for more information see the DEMAND FORECAST DASHBOARD, LEADS Final ADS Demand and Forecast Report and LEADS Gap Analysis).

[27] Even in big European economies, such as Germany and Sweden, there are very few women in the AI workforce (i.e., 20.3% and 22.4% respectively (https://www.stiftung-nv.de/publications/ai-gender-gap)

[28] Communication on boosting startups and innovation in trustworthy artificial intelligence | Shaping Europe's digital future

[29] https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/e6cd4328-673c-4e7a-8683-f63ffb2cf648_en?filename=Political%20Guidelines%202024-2029_EN.pdf

[30] Europe's digital decade: 2030 targets | European Commission

[31] Topic 4.3. of the Digital Europe Programme Work Programme 2025-2027

the different academies and with other DIGITAL funded projects, and their common stakeholders, such as Member State administrations.

As the other digital academies, the AI Skills Academy will have a dedicated self-standing landing page integrated in the Digital Skills and Jobs Platform (DSJP), where its activities, events and initiatives will be disseminated. In line with the one-stop-shop approach of the DSJP, the AI Academy will assemble, curate and promote all existing and forthcoming education, training and funding opportunities, and organise community building activities and events in the specific digital area.

Ethical standards ought to be held across all the Academy's activities. In particular, trustworthy AI design, development, and application, in alignment with the AI Act, **should be the guiding principle for the Academies' contents.**

Scope

In alignment with the other digital academies, the activities of the AI Skills Academy will be centred around three pillars of action.

Pillar 1: Knowledge, education, and training

Under this first pillar, the AI Skills Academy will review, develop, and implement education and training material for university and vocational training students. It will also pilot on-the-job trainings for professionals.

More specifically, the goals of this pillar will be:

1) Complement existing information[32] on the AI skills needs in the EU labour market, the AI role profiles currently demanded across key EU industries and the public sector, and the gaps in the existing European higher education and training offer on AI and, specifically, GenAI.

2) Design educational programme(s) and trainings.

   a. Higher education curricula **at ISCED level 6 or 7 (Bachelor's, Master's or** equivalent level) leading to a degree, and related self-standing modules leading to a certification: To be designed are full programmes and self-standing modules on GenAI model development for ICT students, and on (Gen)AI deployment and application for key industrial sectors (see the list of key sectors below), as well as deployment and application for the EU, national and regional public sectors. This higher education offer will be based on the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System and the Blueprint for a European Degree[33]. Joint degrees are encouraged.

   b. Technical education curricula (such as vocational training): To be designed are curricula that can be adapted for their adoption by technical education and vocational training institutions across EU Member States leading to a vocational qualification. These trainings should aim at enhancing employability through the acquisition of AI- and GenAI-related skills for ICT and non-ICT students. Input from industry partners and **stakeholders, as well as EU Member States' entities responsible for**

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[32] Sources may include analyses performed by the Artificial Intelligence Skills Alliance (ARISA), the European Classification of Skills, Competences and Occupations (ESCO), the existing European Cybersecurity Skills Framework (ECSF) and the Digital Competence Framework 2.2, the insights on AI skills of the European Centre for Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP), the skills demand dashboard of the LeADS project, the studies of the Joint Research Centre's AI watch on educational offer.

[33] Commission presents a blueprint for a European degree | European Education Area

     vocational training, should be included in to fine-tune the content of these trainings, in particular in view of the evolving job market demands.

    c. On-the-job trainings: To be provided are ready-made training materials for specific profiles/professions and sectors (see again the list of sectors below). Some of these materials should be used by courses directly offered by the Academy and delivered online or in person. The training materials should also be made available to companies or public administrations, which wish to implement the trainings with their own resources, while access to these on-the-job trainings should be facilitated for SMEs, start-ups, as well as the public sector that demonstrate the need to upskill their employees. Collaboration with EDIHs is encouraged, where relevant. Professional training design should take into account the European Approach to Microcredentials[34]

3) Implementation and delivery of the above-mentioned educational programmes and trainings. The Academy should at least implement the following:

    a. **one certified Master's programme specialized in GenAI,**

    b. one vocational training scheme,

    a. one on-the-job training programme per profile/profession (and, where possible, per sector).

The implementation should pay particular attention to the attraction and the promotion of opportunities for women through both a scholarship and a returnship programme[35] targeting this underrepresented population. For further **activities addressing women, collaboration with the project "Advancing Girls and Women in Digital"**[36] is encouraged.

In terms of content, the AI Skills Academy will focus on a variety of topics and levels of expertise in AI, with GenAI being a core focus. This includes but is not limited to: GenAI model development, inference processes, data science for AI and GenAI sectoral deployment and adoption.

In alignment with the AI Innovation Package and the upcoming Apply AI Strategy, among the sectors considered of particular interest regarding AI deployment and adoption are:

    a) healthcare and pharmaceutical,
    b) manufacturing,
    c) mobility (including automotive and aerospace),
    d) agriculture,
    e) cultural and creative industries,
    f) energy,
    g) telecommunications,
    h) environment,
    i) robotics,
    j) defence and (cyber)security,
    k) finance, and
    l) public administration, including education.

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[34] A European approach to micro-credentials - European Education Area
[35] Returnship programmes support the re-entering to the workforce after an extended career break, such as for maternity leave.
[36] See topic 4.6 below of the DEP WP 2025-2027

When carrying out activities envisaged under pillar 1, the Academy should create synergies with and build upon already existing efforts and offers, such as the educational programmes and trainings funded under DIGITAL-SO4 on Advanced Digital Skills[37], the ARISA AI Skills Academy[38], and other Erasmus+ Programme and possibly courses offered by the European Digital Innovation Hubs[39], while striving to avoid duplications. Additionally, the AI Skills Academy will collaborate with the project European Advanced Digital Skills Competitions[40] (once established) that will support the design, manage and run the AI competition.

Under topic 4.3 ELEVATE[41]: European League of Advanced Digital Skills Academies of the Digital Europe Work Programme 2025-2027, an action will develop a framework for a certification mechanism of modular learning credentials to provide a seal of quality/accreditation of excellence for advanced digital skills training. The academy is expected to coordinate with this action and pilot and implement the seal of quality/accreditation of excellence for all the training modules they offer.

Proposals with high ambitions in terms of the number of students trained and the successful completion of the trainings, as well as delivering excellent training offer and all other activities are likely to be assessed more positively. Additionally, proposals delivering their activities in several Member States are likely to have more added value.

Pillar 2: Building the ecosystem

Under this second pillar, the Academy will act as a catalyst to attract and retain European and international[42] talent in the EU labour market, including facilitating the matching of AI-skilled workers with jobs. Communication and dissemination activities will further promote career paths and increase the visibility of the Academy and its education and training offer.

More specifically, the goals of this pillar will be:

1) Build and nurture a diverse and rich ecosystem of stakeholders, including businesses from both the AI industry and other key industrial sectors, higher education, vocational and training institutions, research organisations, as well as EU national and regional public[43]. This may include the organisation of stakeholder events, such as matchmaking, career days, and other formats.

In particular, the establishment and promotion of fellowship schemes allowing PhD students and young professionals living abroad to return to Europe and work in EU-based entities is encouraged.

2) Leverage this diverse ecosystem to offer practical professional experiences in collaboration with the industry and the public sector (e.g. **"teach**-the-teacher" schemes).

In this context, to be developed and implemented is also a pilot of a full-time AI apprenticeship programme (to support this programme, FSTP might be used), with

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[37] **For example: AI4Gov Master's, xAIM, AI and Health, DJSP. See:** DIGITAL Projects brochure
[38] ARISA AI Skills Academy
[39] Home | European Digital Innovation Hubs Network
[40] Topic 4.4 of the of the Digital Europe Programme Work Programme 2025-2027
[41] Digital Europe Work Programme 2025-2027, Topic 4.3 ELEVATE: European League of Advanced Digital Skills Academies.
[42] The academies, including the AI Skills Academy, are encouraged to devise international partnerships to attract foreign talent.
[43] **While this diversity should ideally be inherent to the consortium of the Academy (see 'Targeted stakeholders' below), a broader stakeholders' mapping across Member States will be essential to maximize the relevance and impact of the project's actions.**

the aim of preparing a pipeline of AI specialists for working in EU industries and public sector and ensuring their (re-)entry in the EU labour market. To ensure diversity, participants should be selected from various professional and academic backgrounds, as long as they demonstrate a sufficient level of competence in AI and GenAI. Gender balance and cross-Member State representation should be sought, and 15% of the available positions shall be offered to unemployed citizens and/or EU young professionals returning from abroad. After a first training period, participants will work on concrete AI projects for European companies and/or public sector entities. Companies and/or public entities involved should make available real-world data and production environments. Compensation schemes should be provided to the participants by the involved companies or entities[44].

To increase the impact and the long-term sustainability and to ensure the continued delivery of the designed educational and training programmes, the proposals are expected to foster the dissemination, promotion and uptake of the designed curricula as widely as possible through the main European Universities and Technological Institutes of each Member State. Furthermore, the Academy will engage with the national education ecosystems to scale up existing education and training offers (for example the higher education programmes funded under DIGITAL) and make them available throughout Europe. Active collaboration and inputs from industry must be sought for all activities.

3) Communicate about the opportunities offered by the Academy and more generally the EU AI education and job market, as well as disseminate outcomes and results. This should be done via a dedicated landing page integrated in the Digital Skills and Jobs Platform, a self-**standing website titled "AI Skills Academy", and any** other relevant channels. A specific outreach campaign targeting European AI experts and professionals living abroad, aiming to inform them of the opportunities for further education, training and employment in the EU, is to be set up.

Communication should also be strongly coordinated with the umbrella action awarded under the topic **"ELEVATE: European League of Advanced Digital Skills Academies"** (see topic 4.3 of the DEP WP 2025-2027)[45] that will federate the Digital Europe **Programme's Academies. The Academy will build synergies with the AI**-focused initiatives part of the EU AI Innovation ecosystem, namely the AI-on-Demand Platform, the Networks of Excellence in AI, the European Digital Innovation Hubs, and the upcoming AI Factories.

Synergies and complementarities with other EU-funded programmes and existing education and training initiatives should be pursued, in particular with the Artificial Intelligence Skills Alliance (ARISA), the Digital Large-Scale Partnership under the Pact for Skills[46], the EIT Campus and EIT Community AI[47], the Next Generation Talent initiative[48], the Deep Tech Talent Initiative (DTTI)[49], the European Universities Alliances[50], Alliances for Innovation[51] and the Centres for Vocational Excellence.

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[44] For the development of the pilot apprenticeship, it should be considered the experience of the already successful AI Apprenticeship Programme launched by AI Singapore.

[45] Digital Europe Work Programme 2025-2027, Topic 4.3 ELEVATE: European League of Advanced Digital Skills Academies.

[46] https://pact-for-skills.ec.europa.eu/about/industrial-ecosystems-and-partnerships/digital_en

[47] EIT Artificial Intelligence Community - Boosting AI in Europe

[48] InnoNext: The Next Generation Innovation Talents' Initiative - European Commission

[49] EIT Deep Tech Talent Initiative

[50] European Universities alliances and their partners - European Education Area

[51] Alliances for innovation - Erasmus+

An additional dissemination action should target high school students, who would benefit from being informed regarding the education and training opportunities offered by the Academy.

Wider dissemination via, for example, European universities, technological and training facilities as well as cultural and civic institutes and EU-funded projects (also targeting the civil society), will be important to promote new activities and scaling up existing ones, not only at EU, but also at regional and local level.

Pillar 3: Measuring progress

Under the third pillar, the Academy will monitor the progress and impact of its activities. More specifically, the goals of this pillar will be:

1) Develop and implement a robust methodology to systematically monitor the progress achieved in closing the identified AI skills gaps[52]. For this monitoring, EU measurement frameworks such as the Reports on the Digital Decade Policy Programme should be taken into account, as well as, where relevant, data infrastructures such as the Common European Data Space for Skills, and data insights from e.g. the EU Advanced Digital Skills Project (LeADS)[53], StepUp StartUps[54], the Artificial Intelligence Skills Alliance (ARISA), and the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP)[55]. The Academy might also **seek alignment with other upcoming monitoring tools of DG CNECT's European AI Office**.

2) Based on the progress monitoring, suggest and implement adjustments of the **Academy's activities**. This objective should also take into consideration the feedback received from **Academy's participants.**

Additionally, a sustainability plan ought to be developed that explains how the impact of the project beyond the period of EU funding can be guaranteed (please see section 10 on mandatory deliverables).

Proposals are highly encouraged to cover the following points explicitly under the RELEVANCE criterion:

- Proposals should explicitly demonstrate how they align with the three pillars of the AI Skills Academy (Knowledge, education, and training; Building the ecosystem; and Measuring progress).

- Proposals should demonstrate the extent to which the project will support the development of skills and training for AI and GenAI in specific EU industries, including healthcare and pharmaceutical, manufacturing, mobility including automotive and aerospace, agriculture, cultural and creative industries, energy, telecommunications, environment, robotics, defence and (cyber)security, finance, and public administration, including education.

- **Proposals should explain how the project's materials, courses and programmes** provided are designed to take into consideration all relevant new

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[52] For this monitoring, EU measurement frameworks such as the Reports on the Digital Decade Policy Programme will be taken into account, as well as data insights from e.g., the Common European Data Space for Skills, the EU Advanced Digital Skills Project (LeADS), StepUp StartUps, the Artificial Intelligence Skills Alliance (ARISA), and the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP), where relevant. The Academy might also need to seek alignment with other **upcoming monitoring tools of DG CNECT's European AI Office.**

[53] EU Advanced Digital Skills Project

[54] StepUp StartUps

[55] European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training

developments and trends regarding AI and GenAI and show responsiveness to evolving labour market needs.

– Proposals should describe how the project will contribute to the EU's relevant policies (e.g., AI Innovation Package, upcoming Apply AI Strategy, Digital Decade Policy Programme), and synergies with activities at European level.

– Proposals should describe the extent to which the consortium foresees to **establish synergies with other Digital Europe Programme's initiatives and other** EU projects as mentioned in the objectives.

Proposals are highly encouraged to cover the following points explicitly under the IMPLEMENTATION criterion:

– Proposals should demonstrate the maturity of the project by describing the totality of the content to be proposed in a structured manner, linking content items to specific objectives or deliverables mentioned in this call text. A granular description of deliverables is essential.

– Proposals should describe the implementation plan, including how the different content items will be designed, developed, implemented by members of the **consortium, the needed resources and timeline. All the Academy's education** and training activities should be starting at the latest, at the beginning of the second year of the project.

– Proposals should explain the rationale behind the proposed work packages and tasks, and how they are linked to the objectives/activities/key tasks of the topic. Ensure that the work packages support the three pillars outlined above.

– Proposals should provide deliverables and milestones that are suited to the scope of the proposed implementation and allow for the monitoring of the **project's implementation. Ensure that outcomes and deliverables listed in this** call are embedded in the implementation plan.

– If applicable, proposals should explain how students will be financially supported to participate to the programme(s), training modules (e.g. via scholarships, fee waivers or others), and especially to acquire practical experience either with members of the consortium or with companies and organisations outside the consortium. This support can take the form of Financial Support to Third Parties, in particular for the funding of scholarships, fellowships, returnship programmes and apprenticeships.

– Proposals should explain the feasibility of the proposed implementation timeline and budget/use of resources taking into account the proposed work packages.

– Proposals should demonstrate the capacity of the applicants and the consortium as a whole to carry out the proposed work, with particular emphasis on the role to be played by industrial participants.

– Proposals should present how the members of the consortium complement each other, their expertise and their contributions to the project. Make sure to clearly indicate the role each partner will play in the proposal. Clarify how content will be (co-)designed by members of the consortium, with particular emphasis on the role to be played by industrial participants.

Proposals are highly encouraged to cover the following points explicitly under the IMPACT criterion:

– Proposals should describe the expected outcomes and deliverables referred to in the call for proposals and, where relevant, the plans to disseminate and communicate project achievements. The added value of the proposed deliverables compared to the existing offer should be highlighted. The legacy and long-term impact of the Academy beyond the end of the funded project should be highlighted.

– Proposals should ensure that all outcomes and deliverables listed below are addressed by the proposal (and are included in the implementation plan). The added value of the proposed deliverables compared to the existing offer should be highlighted. The legacy and long-term impact of the Academy beyond the end of the funded project should be highlighted.

– Proposals should present all KPIs to be used to for the proposal (incl. Targets). Ensure to cover the obligatory KPIs mentioned below. Propose ambitious KPIs to be achieved by your proposal.

– Proposals should demonstrate the potential of the project to have a multiplier effect, reaching a large number of beneficiaries and creating a lasting impact on the EU labour market. This should include plans for scaling up successful initiatives, creating a network of stakeholders, and developing tools and resources that can be widely adopted.

– Proposals should demonstrate the extent to which the project will close the AI skills gap, improve access to and allocation of workforce in the labour market and strengthen competitiveness across EU strategic industries and the public sector.

– Proposals should explain how the project will align with EU values. Firstly, the project should consider how it will encourage students and professionals to design, develop, apply and use AI in line with ethical standards. Secondly, the project should demonstrate the extent to which it will consider benefits for the society and the environment. Finally, the project should explain how the project will be inclusive, addressing the specific challenge of increasing the proportion of female AI specialists and encourage a diverse workforce in the field of AI.

Outcomes and deliverables

By the end of the project, the selected proposal will be required to have achieved the following:

– Detailed description and their related skills, competences and education/training paths, in line with the previously gathered information on the skills gaps and educational/training offer[56]. The description should be linked to the European Classification of Skills, Competences and Occupations (ESCO) and take inspiration from the existing European Cybersecurity Skills Framework (ECSF)[57]. Adaptation of the roles to different sectors should be considered.

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[56] Sources may include analyses performed by the Artificial Intelligence Skills Alliance (ARISA), the European Classification of Skills, Competences and Occupations (ESCO), the existing European Cybersecurity Skills Framework (ECSF) and the Digital Competence Framework 2.2, the insights on AI skills of the European Centre for Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP), the skills demand dashboard of the LeADS project, the studies of the Joint Research Centre's AI watch on educational offer.

[57] European Cybersecurity Skills Framework (ECSF) | ENISA

– <u>Development and implementation</u> **of comprehensive academic (Bachelor's and/or Master's) curricula to train the identified and needed AI profiles,** including in specific sectors of application of AI. <u>At least one certified</u> **<u>Bachelor's or Master's programme specialized in GenAI should be</u> <u>implemented</u>**, with a focus on enabling students from different backgrounds and genders to become AI specialists. Minimum number of students enrolled in a single programme per cycle: 120 for a 3-year Bachelor (minimum number of women: 42), 80 for a two-year Master (minimum number of women: 28), 40 for a 1-year Master (minimum number of women: 14).

– <u>Development and implementation of vocational training curricula</u> to train the identified and needed AI profiles, including in specific sectors of application of AI. <u>At least one vocational training scheme should be implemented</u>, with a focus on enabling students from different backgrounds and genders to become AI specialists. Minimum number of students enrolled in an single **institute's** scheme per cycle: 100 per 2-year scheme (minimum number of women: 35), 200 per 3-year scheme (minimum number of women: 70).

– <u>Number of professionals working in SMEs, start-ups, as well as the public</u> <u>sector</u>, who are benefiting from on-the-job training programmes. At least one pilot per profile/profession and possibly per sector. Minimum number of professionals completing a single training: 100 of which minimum number of women: 35.

– <u>Design, development, and support for the implementation</u> of actions to increase the proportion of female AI specialists and encouraging a diverse workforce, starting with a scholarships and returnship scheme for women. Minimum number of women supported (per single scheme): 40 per year (total for two schemes: 80).

– <u>Development and implementation of a pilot EU AI apprenticeship programme</u> to develop a pipeline of AI specialists for the EU industries and public sector, with exposure to real-world data, use cases, and production environments of existing companies/entities. Minimum number of apprentices completing the programme (per cycle of 6 to 9 months): 300 of which minimum number of women: 105.

– <u>Development and implementation of a sound communication and</u> <u>dissemination strategy</u> including different communication and awareness-raising activities, such as social media campaigns and events, and a specific outreach campaign to AI experts and specialists living abroad.

– <u>Development and implementation of a network and synergy strategy</u> between the Academy and other EU projects and initiatives, as well as with industrial and public sector actors, including the promotion of fellowships in EU-based entities.

– <u>Development of a robust methodology to recurrently monitor the evolution of</u> <u>the progress</u> **(e.g. via KPIs, users' feedback)** achieved in closing the respective AI skills gaps via the offered activities.

– <u>Development of a long-term exploitation strategy</u> which outlines the long-term impact of the Academy beyond the end of the funded project.

– <u>Curation of a self-standing website and a dedicated landing page integrated in</u> <u>the Digital Skills and Jobs Platform</u>, where all activities, events, and initiatives of the academy are disseminated.

KPIs to measures outcomes and deliverables

The KPIs to measure outcomes and deliverables should be provided by the **consortium. KPIs should address the points under the 'Scope' section. Priority will be** given to consortia who provide realistic, relevant, qualitative and quantitative KPIs **that best reflect the proposal's main outcomes and deliverables. The following KPIs** should be included as a minimum (i.e. to be expanded and detailed as needed):

– Number of higher education curricula developed and implemented.

– Number of vocational training schemes developed and implemented.

– Number of on-the-job trainings per AI profile developed and implemented.

– Number of participants in the offered higher education, vocational training and on-the-job trainings offered (including percentage of full completion).

– Number of scholarships and returnship schemes implemented, their value, and the number of women benefitting from the scheme.

– **Number of participants in the different Academy's activities successfully joining** the labour market as AI specialists, breaking down per demographics, gender, profession.

– Number of places in the apprenticeship programme offered to unemployed citizens.

– Number of website visitors to the self-standing website and followers on social media.

– Number of communications and awareness-raising activities conducted to promote the project's outcomes and deliverables and number of participants.

– Number of collaborations with industry (in particular for the sectors of interest) and the public sector.

Targeted stakeholders

The participating consortium members should demonstrate complementary roles in the proposal and demonstrate an outstanding track record in their respective fields.

The consortium is highly recommended to include at least:

– Two degree awarding higher education institution from an eligible country which are part of the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE). Higher education institutions established in other eligible countries which are not part of the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education can also be included in the consortium. In this case, the consortium must prove that the specific higher education institution is recognised by the competent national authority and offers full study programmes leading to higher education degrees and recognised diplomas at tertiary education qualifications levels.

– Two industry partners whose headquarters are located in an eligible country. The consortium is encouraged to particularly involve small and medium enterprises (SMEs) as well as start-ups. Participating businesses must clearly explain their contribution to the objectives of the action and should be ideally representative of key EU industries, including healthcare and pharmaceutical, manufacturing, mobility including automotive and aerospace, agriculture, cultural and creative industries, energy, telecoms, environment, robotics, defence and (cyber)security, and finance.

– One independent research organisation/hub or competence/excellence centre in AI.

– One Vocational Education and Training (VET) institution.

The involvement of public sector organisations in the consortium can be also considered.

Particular attention should be given to:

– Ensuring inclusivity in Europe and help widening the specialised education offer in all Member States with a special focus on those Member States that score low in terms of advanced digital skills levels, according to the Digital Decade Policy Programme, in particular in the field of AI;

– Ensuring inclusivity of public or private bodies that are not currently already engaged in other European projects addressing skills in AI.

Please note that higher education institutions already delivering similar programmes as the ones addressed by the proposal addressing this call topic can participate. However, they must explain the added value of the newly designed programme(s) and self-standing module(s) compared to the existing education offer delivered in the latest academic years.

European Universities alliances selected under the Erasmus+ programme and other alliances of higher education institutions are also encouraged to participate, provided that they include the necessary partners requested and they fulfil all the objectives outlined in this section. Participation of alliances involving VET institutions such as COVEs[58] is possible.

Type of Action and Funding Rate

Lump Sum Grants — 50% funding rate

For more information on Digital Europe types of action, *see Annex 1*.

Specific topic conditions

– For this topic, multi-beneficiary applications are mandatory and specific conditions for the consortium composition apply *(see section 6)*

– For this topic, the following reimbursement option for equipment costs applies: depreciation cost only *(see section 10)*. The lump sum for equipment costs should be calculated with depreciation costs in the detailed budget table.

– For this topic, financial support to third parties is allowed *(see section 10)*

– The following parts of the award criteria in section 9 are exceptionally NOT applicable for this topic:

– extent to which the project would reinforce and secure the digital technology supply chain in the Union*

– extent to which the proposal can overcome financial obstacles such as the lack of market finance*

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[58] Centres of Vocational Excellence - European Commission

– extent to which the proposal addresses environmental sustainability and the European Green Deal goals, in terms of direct effects and/or in awareness of environmental effects*

DIGITAL-2025-SKILLS-08-VIRTUAL-WORLDS-ACADEMY-STEP — Sectoral digital skills academies: Virtual Worlds Skills Academy

Objectives

The EU's Virtual Worlds Skills Academy will pursue the following objectives:

– Building on the existing actions and initiatives in Virtual Worlds in close cooperation with industry. Identifying meaningful current academic and training offers, while identifying the gaps that may exist. developing new training offers, scaling up successful ones and proposing up-to date and flexible education and training curricula[59] and programmes[60] to reinforce the number of virtual worlds specialists.

– Planning and designing the Competence and qualification framework (CQF) for education and training in virtual worlds, including qualification standards, for different students/trainee categories, job profiles and professional roles. The CQF will be used as a reference by the EU education and training providers in disciplines related to virtual worlds.

– Based on the CQF, developing, managing and maintaining a catalogue of education and training curricula and programmes for the virtual worlds domain of expertise, for a variety of target groups across the EU.

– Creating an ecosystem of EU stakeholders involved in teaching disciplines related to virtual worlds technologies to increase the capacity of nurturing, attracting and retaining talent.

The Academy must act as a catalyst for industry to promote careers, with an **emphasis on facilitating women's access to education and training in disciplines** related to virtual worlds technologies. In this sense, it will complement the existing actions and initiatives in the digital skills area, while closely collaborating with the EU-funded umbrella action 4.3 ELEVATE[61].

Scope

Proposals are expected to focus on the following, under the three pillars below:

Pillar 1: Knowledge, education and training

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[59] *Curriculum* is meant as an inventory of activities related to the design, organisation and planning of an education or training action, including definition of learning objectives, content of programmes, methods (including assessment of learners and evaluation of programmes) and material, as well as arrangements for training teachers and trainers (Cf Cedefop https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/vet-glossary/glossary?letter=C)

[60] *Education or training programme* is meant as an Inventory of activities, content and methods implemented to achieve education or training objectives (acquiring knowledge, know-how, information, values, skills and competences), organised in a logical sequence over a specified period (cf Cedefop glossary) https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/vet-glossary/glossary?search=education+programme&letter=E

[61] Digital Europe Work Programme 2025-2027, Topic 4.3 ELEVATE: European League of Advanced Digital Skills Academies.

Designing, developing and handling operations in virtual worlds entail the interplay between the following sets of disciplines, corresponding to key building blocks of virtual worlds:

– innovative technologies (e.g. extended reality (XR), blockchain, AI, data, edge computing, high-performance computing, 3D graphics, interactive media, computer vision, modelling and industrial applications (digital twins), digital identity, and big data),

– creative subjects (e.g. audiovisual production, performing arts, animation, architecture, creative writing and storytelling, fashion, game design), and

– social sciences and humanities (e.g. law, ethics, geography, anthropology).

Integrating this underlying interdisciplinarity approach, the Academy will plan and design a solid Competence and qualification framework (CQF) for education and training in virtual worlds, as outlined under Objectives. The CFQ will present the qualifications and competencies required in pursuing learning paths towards different profiles, professional roles and careers, in alignment with EU industry needs. In terms of quality standards, the Academy will work together with the umbrella action ELEVATE, which will develop a framework for a certification mechanism of modular learning credentials to provide a seal of quality/accreditation of excellence for advanced digital skills training. The Academy is expected to coordinate with ELEVATE to pilot and implement the seal of quality/accreditation of excellence for all the training modules they offer.

The CFQ will be based on up-to-date reports, studies market analyses, and trend forecasts on advanced digital skills, in alignment with relevant EU policy actions and guidelines.

The consortium partners are expected to commit as the first adopters of the CQF and promoters for further uptake by other institutions targeting the EU wide adoption.

Anchored in the CQF, the Academy will develop, manage and maintain, as outlined under Objectives, a catalogue of education and training curricula and programmes for the virtual worlds domain of expertise. The catalogue will incorporate and coordinate existing academic education programmes, professional training, short-term courses, modules, resources and similarly relevant activities, which are delivered and made available by consortium partners, and, where needed, develop new ones.

The Academy will target the following groups:

1) Higher education students and young graduates wishing to specialise in the design and development of virtual worlds.

Proposals will provide curricula and multidisciplinary programmes to equip students with skills for the different profiles needed for virtual worlds creation processes. The programmes will cover all the above-mentioned sets of disciplines, i.e. innovative technologies, creative subjects, and social sciences and humanities, and ensure, among others:

– the necessary level of modularity to allow students to pursue tailored learning paths, according to their educational profile and desired level of specialisation (e.g. this can mean a master's degree or 1-2 courses to fill in a specific skills gap).

– the development of skills complementarity (e.g. creative education for students with technical profiles, ethics training for digital creative arts students).

– opportunities to combine, where needed, theoretical courses with hands-on experience (e.g. in research labs or during internships with industry partners).

– alignment with the Blueprint for a European Degree[62].

– the use of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS).

2) Academic staff teaching disciplines related to virtual worlds technologies.

Proposals will provide for professional development and specialisation schemes, including fellowships and exchanges in cooperation with industry, where relevant. In **addition, Teacher's mobility** between higher education institutions is encouraged and funded under Erasmus+.

3) Upper secondary and/or vocational education (VET) students wishing to work in the virtual worlds area.

Proposals will include curricula and programmes focussing on hands-on learning methods (e.g. apprenticeships, internships).

4) Upper secondary and/or VET teaching staff.

To allow for the teachers' proper specialisation in disciplines related to virtual worlds technologies, proposals will present upskilling and reskilling schemes, including placements in enterprises.

5) Professionals in different sectors (e.g. health, agriculture, automotive, public administration) and institution types (e.g. SMEs, start-ups. public) who wish to upskill/reskill to be able to operate in virtual worlds.

Given the increasing need for digital skills proficiency and specialisation in domains such as automotive, healthcare, education, agriculture, as well as in the public sector, the Academy will cater for upskilling and reskilling of professionals in these areas. In addition, to complete the knowledge cycle, the Academy is expected to stimulate and enable, when possible, the participation of the different professional communities in exchanges and co-creation activities with the developers of virtual worlds technologies.

For this target group, the Academy will develop training activities and provide learning resources as clusters focussing on either closely related areas of expertise (such as medical specialties or public administration applications), or on multi-use technologies (e.g. digital twins). Other similarly relevant ways of structuring the training activities and learning resources can be envisaged. Proposals will present at least 1 (one) such cluster of training activities and learning resources, structured in a modular way, that will enable the creation of learning packages corresponding to the **participants' knowledge level and objectives.**

6) Citizens

The Academy will support the acquisition of basic knowledge in virtual worlds to make citizens aware of the opportunities and risks that they may encounter as regular

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[62] Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions a blueprint for a European degree (europa.eu)

users. In addition, the Academy will empower young people to engage with virtual worlds and foster their interest in finding a job in this technological area.

As mentioned under Objectives, proposals will, to the greatest extent possible, capitalise on, and get inspiration from, existing specialised education and training activities at EU, Member State or regional level, both in the public and private sectors. New activities will be proposed, as needed.

This catalogue will be stored on Digital Skills and Jobs Platform (DSJP)[63], where it will be made accessible to the interested public through a well-designed interface.

The Academy will commit as the first adopter and provider of the designed programmes and activities for each above stated target group. The consortium will deliver a minimum of one higher education programme leading to a degree (starting two programme cycles) and is encouraged to provide at least one vocational programme. To close the talent gap[64] and strengthen the pool of specialists, the active participation of industry will be key to the design of curricula and delivery of education programmes.

Proposals with high ambitions in terms of the number of students trained and successful completion of the programme(s), as well as delivering excellent programmes and all other activities are likely to be assessed more positively. Additionally, proposals delivering their activities in several Member States are likely to have more added value.

Pillar 2: Building the ecosystem

The Academy will create synergies with EU-wide ongoing initiatives or schemes (e.g. Erasmus+) and maintain constant collaboration with the EU advanced digital skills umbrella action ELEVATE[65] that will coordinate and foster collaboration among sectoral academies and initiatives, as well as with the European Advanced Digital Skills Competitions[66] project supporting the design, managing and running of the virtual worlds competition. The academy will also build synergies and complementarities with other EU funding programmes and existing education and training initiatives such as the EIT Campus, the EIT Community AI and EIT Deep Tech Talent Initiative (DTTI), the Erasmus+ European Universities Alliances, Alliances for Innovation and Centres of Vocational Excellence, and their possible follow-up initiatives, as well as the Large-Scale Partnerships under the Pact for Skills. Cross-border partnerships and collaboration frameworks among relevant EU stakeholders will be essential for good quality proposals.

A sustainability plan will also be proposed to show how the Academy will continue to expand beyond the duration of the project.

Building upon and expanding this network, the Virtual Worlds Academy will foster an ecosystem of EU stakeholders around virtual worlds skills, which will include, at least:

- higher education institutions,

- upper secondary schools, VET institutions,

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[63] https://digital-skills-jobs.europa.eu/en
[64] The DEP coordination and support action LEADS performed a skills demand analysis, programme and courses mapping, and a gap analysis of the advance digital skills in Europe, and its findings show high current and future demands for specialist in key digital areas (for more information see the DEMAND FORECAST DASHBOARD, LEADS Final ADS Demand and Forecast Report and LEADS Gap Analysis).
[65] See topic 4.3 of the Digital Europe Programme Work Programme 2025-2027.
[66] See topic 4.4 of the of the Digital Europe Programme Work Programme 2025-2027.

- research organisations, innovation centres,

- industry partners,

- public institutions at EU and Member State or regional level (e.g. ministries, agencies),

- NGOs, associations, (e.g. for consumers),

- Education service providers.

The ecosystem of stakeholders will strive to nurture, attract and retain virtual worlds talent in the EU, paying special attention to enrolling women, and to facilitate employability on the EU labour market. International partnerships to attract foreign talent are also encouraged.

To this end, the consortium will involve the ecosystem of stakeholders in awareness raising campaigns, communication and dissemination activities, prizes, including by using Financial Support for Third Parties (FSTP), or competitions to promote the Academy. In addition, the consortium will encourage the virtual worlds organisations in the ecosystem, in particular industry stakeholders, to propose and test practical solutions, such as internships, fellowships or scholarships, for which funding can be also ensured through FSTP. All such initiatives will be published on the DSJP website.

To increase the impact and ensure the continued delivery of the designed educational and training programmes, the proposals are expected to foster as wide as possible the dissemination and promotion of the designed curricula in the main European Universities and Technological Institutes. Furthermore, the academy will engage the education ecosystem to scale up existing education and training offers (for example the higher education programmes funded under DIGITAL) and make them available throughout Europe. Active collaboration and inputs from industry must be sought for **all activities.**

Pillar 3: Measuring progress

The proposals will include a robust methodology to monitor the evolution of the labour market, and the progress achieved in closing the virtual worlds skills gap. The indicators and benchmarks will be in line with the EU measurement frameworks.

Progress monitoring will allow for adjustments in the proposed actions, where needed.

Proposals are highly encouraged to cover the following points explicitly under the RELEVANCE criterion:

- Explain how the Academy will contribute to reducing the skills gap in the virtual worlds area, in alignment with the Digital Decade targets;

- Explain how the Virtual Worlds Skills Academy contributes to the development of a skilled workforce in virtual worlds, and how this benefits EU industry.

Proposals are highly encouraged to cover the following points explicitly under the IMPLEMENTATION criterion:

- **Explain the rationale behind the planning and design of the Academy's** proposed curricula and the multidisciplinary programmes, with an emphasis on how modularity and complementarity are applied. Provide details on how learning paths for the various target groups are built and where the creation of new education and training activities is needed;

- Provide concrete details on how the delivery of the activities under the mentioned multidisciplinary programmes is carried out;

– Explain the role of cross-border partnerships and collaboration frameworks in **the creation and delivery of the Academy's curricula and programmes.**

– If applicable, explain how students will be financially supported to participate to the programme(s), training modules (e.g. via scholarships, fee waivers or others), and especially to acquire practical experience either with members of the consortium or with companies and organisations outside the consortium (e.g. via internships, fellowships or short-term job placements).

– Explain how students from countries with whom the European Commission has ongoing international cooperation related to digital topics (e.g. digital partnerships, trade and technology councils, policy dialogues, Talent Growth Task Force) will be financially supported (e.g. via scholarships, fellowships, fee waivers or others) to participate in the programme(s) and how gender conversion will be promoted. This support can take the form of Financial Support to Third Parties.

– If applicable, explain if and how digital solutions, equipment and infrastructure will be purchased/leased to ensure the programme(s) and self-standing module(s) have the necessary facilities to deliver excellence.

Proposals are highly encouraged to cover the following points explicitly under the IMPACT criterion:

– Demonstrate the efficiency of the communication and dissemination activities put in place to raise awareness about the Virtual Worlds Skills Academy and attract talent.

Outcomes and deliverables

Outcomes:

– Through designed and delivered education and training activities, the Academy will prepare the workforce to contribute in a sizeable way to closing the virtual worlds skills gap, acting as a booster for competitiveness and innovation for European companies and research organisations.

– The Competence and Qualification Framework (CFQ) for Virtual Worlds Skills will get increasingly adopted by EU-wide education and training institutions, as a trusted qualification and quality assurance reference for teaching virtual worlds skills.

– The ecosystem of EU stakeholders will propose, under the coordination of the Academy, actions to reach a better balance between the demand and offer of virtual worlds skills.

Deliverables:

– The Competence and qualification framework (CQF) for education and training in virtual worlds, including qualification standards designed;

– The CQF-based education and training curricula developed for the teaching of disciplines related to virtual worlds technologies for all the six (6) target groups, as required under Scope;

– The programmes planned under these curricula delivered;

– The complete catalogue of education and training curricula and programmes **for the virtual worlds domain of expertise published on the Academy's** dedicated space on the DSJP;

– A concept document in support of the building and fostering the ecosystem of EU stakeholders in virtual worlds skills area, with examples of proposed initiatives prepared;

– Among these proposed initiatives, at least some of them implemented, such as partnerships and collaboration frameworks established between academia, industry (including SMEs) and research institutions to facilitate and promote the large-scale European-wide roll-out of the academic programmes and short-term trainings;

– Joint (practical) educational initiatives and events with industry facilitated, such as on-the-**job experiences in companies' premises, mentorship schemes,** internship programmes, summer schools, bootcamps, visits to facilities, career days;

– Support, integration, and visibility schemes implemented, with particular attention aimed at the participation of female students and female professionals in education and training activities, as well as talented young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and people with disabilities;

– Communication and awareness-raising activities, events and initiatives dedicated the all the six (6) target groups carried out and disseminated extensively through a variety of channels, including social media and DSJP;

– A robust methodology provided for the monitoring of the evolution of the labour market and the progress achieved in closing the virtual worlds skills gap;

– A sustainability plan to show how the Academy will continue to expand beyond the duration of the project prepared.

KPIs to measures outcomes and deliverables

The project will report based on the minimum set of KPIs indicated below. It is recommended to add any other relevant, as deemed necessary in the context of the project.

– Number of delivered education and training activities included under the **Academy's curricula and programmes, broken down by target groups;**

– **Number of students/trainees enrolled in Academy's education and training** activities, broken down by target groups;

– **Number of students/trainees having completed the Academy's education and** training activities, broken down by target groups;

– Number of dissemination and communication activities by type, professional profile, audience etc.

Targeted stakeholders

The selected consortium must demonstrate complementary roles and an established track record in virtual-worlds technological and/or non-technological building blocks, in training and education, and proven experience with the design and implementation of complex education programmes. It is highly recommended for consortia to include

3 higher education institutions from 3 different eligible countries, a minimum of 2 industry partners with headquarters in 2 different eligible countries and at least 1 research organisations/excellence centres. The consortium is also encouraged to particularly involve small and medium enterprises (SMEs), and start-ups. For each of these partners, the proposals will explain the relevance of their participation in the project.

To facilitate the participation of Vocational Education and Training (VET) institutions in the design and delivery of advanced digital skills training opportunities and to support flexible learning pathways, it is encouraged to seek cooperation with VET providers, preferably as partners in the consortium. The proposals should outline how the proposed project will exploit the unique insights of VET into the labour market needs and its links with the industry to support the design of curricula and delivery of the programmes.

Type of Action and Funding Rate

Lump Sum Grants — 50% funding rate

For more information on Digital Europe types of action, *see Annex 1.*

Specific topic conditions

- For this topic, multi-beneficiary applications are mandatory and specific conditions for the consortium composition apply (see section 6)

- For this topic, the following reimbursement option for equipment costs applies: depreciation cost only *(see section 10).* The lump sum for equipment costs should be calculated with depreciation costs in the detailed budget table.

- For this topic, financial support to third parties is allowed *(see section 10)*

- The following parts of the award criteria in section 9 are exceptionally NOT applicable for this topic:

  - extent to which the project would reinforce and secure the digital technology supply chain in the Union*

  - extent to which the proposal can overcome financial obstacles such as the lack of market finance*

  - extent to which the proposal addresses environmental sustainability and the European Green Deal goals, in terms of direct effects and/or in awareness of environmental effects*

3. Available budget

The estimated available call budget is EUR 27 000 000.

Specific budget information per topic can be found in the table below:

Topic	Topic budget

DIGITAL-2025-SKILLS-08-QUANTUM-ACADEMY-STEP	EUR 10 000 000
DIGITAL-2025-SKILLS-08-GENAI-ACADEMY-STEP	EUR 7 000 000
DIGITAL-2025-SKILLS-08-VIRTUAL-WORLDS-ACADEMY-STEP	EUR 10 000 000

We reserve the right not to award all available funds or to redistribute them between the call priorities, depending on the proposals received and the results of the evaluation.

4. Timetable and deadlines

Timetable and deadlines (indicative)	
Call opening:	15 April 2025
Deadline for submission:	2 September 2025 – 17:00:00 CEST (Brussels)
Evaluation:	September-November 2025
Information on evaluation results:	November 2025
GA signature:	February 2026

5. Admissibility and documents

Proposals must be submitted before the call deadline *(see timetable section 4)*.

Proposals must be submitted electronically via the Funding & Tenders Portal Electronic Submission System (accessible via the Topic page in the Search Funding & Tenders section. Paper submissions are NOT possible.

Proposals (including annexes and supporting documents) must be submitted using the forms provided *inside* the Submission System (⚠ NOT the documents available on the Topic page — they are only for information).

Proposals must be complete and contain all the requested information and all required annexes and supporting documents:

- – Application Form Part A — contains administrative information about the participants (future coordinator, beneficiaries and affiliated entities) and the summarised budget for the project *(to be filled in directly online)*

- – Application Form Part B — contains the technical description of the project *(template to be downloaded from the Portal Submission System, completed, assembled and re-uploaded)*

- – mandatory annexes and supporting documents *(templates to be downloaded from the Portal Submission System, completed, assembled and re-uploaded)*:

    - – detailed budget table/calculator: applicable

- CVs of core project team: not applicable

- activity reports of last year: not applicable

- list of previous projects (key projects for the last 4 years) *(template available in Part B):* applicable

- ownership control declarations: not applicable

Please be aware that since the detailed budget table serves as the basis for fixing the lump sums for the grants (and since lump sums must be reliable proxies for the actual costs of a project), the costs you include MUST comply with the basic eligibility conditions for EU actual cost grants *(see AGA — Annotated Grant Agreement, art 6)*. This is particularly important for purchases and subcontracting, which must comply with best value for money (or if appropriate the lowest price) and be free of any conflict of interests. If the budget table contains ineligible costs, the grant may be reduced (even later on during the project implementation or after their end).

At proposal submission, you will have to confirm that you have the mandate to act for all applicants. Moreover you will have to confirm that the information in the application is correct and complete and that the participants comply with the conditions for receiving EU funding (especially eligibility, financial and operational capacity, exclusion, etc). Before signing the grant, each beneficiary and affiliated entity will have to confirm this again by signing a declaration of honour (DoH). Proposals without full support will be rejected.

Your application must be readable, accessible and printable.

Proposals are limited to maximum 70 pages (Part B). Evaluators will not consider any additional pages.

You may be asked at a later stage for further documents *(for legal entity validation, financial capacity check, bank account validation, etc.).*

For more information about the submission process (including IT aspects), consult the Online Manual.

6. Eligibility

Eligible participants (eligible countries)

In order to be eligible, the applicants (beneficiaries and affiliated entities) must:

- be legal entities (public or private bodies)

- be established in one of the eligible countries, i.e.:

  - EU Member States (including overseas countries and territories (OCTs))

  - non-EU countries

    - listed EEA countries and countries associated to the Digital Europe Programme (list of participating countries)

Beneficiaries and affiliated entities must register in the Participant Register — before submitting the proposal — and will have to be validated by the Central Validation Service (REA Validation). For the validation, they will be requested to upload documents showing legal status and origin.

Other entities may participate in other consortium roles, such as associated partners, subcontractors, third parties giving in-kind contributions, etc *(see section 13)*.

Specific cases and definitions

Natural persons — Natural persons — Natural persons are NOT eligible (with the exception of self-employed persons, i.e. sole traders, where the company does not have legal personality separate from that of the natural person).

International organisations — International organisations are NOT eligible, unless they are International organisations of European Interest within the meaning of Article 2 of the Digital Europe Regulation (i.e. international organisations the majority of whose members are Member States or whose headquarters are in a Member State).

Entities without legal personality — Entities which do not have legal personality under their national law may exceptionally participate, provided that their representatives have the capacity to undertake legal obligations on their behalf, and offer guarantees for the protection of the EU financial interests equivalent to that offered by legal persons[67].

EU bodies — EU bodies (with the exception of the European Commission Joint Research Centre) can NOT be part of the consortium.

Associations and interest groupings — Entities composed of members may participate as 'sole beneficiaries' or 'beneficiaries without legal personality'[68]. ⚠ Please note that if the action will be implemented by the members, they should also participate (either as beneficiaries or as affiliated entities, otherwise their costs will NOT be eligible).

Countries currently negotiating association agreements — Beneficiaries from countries with ongoing negotiations for participating in the programme *(see list of participating countries above)* may participate in the call and can sign grants if the negotiations are concluded before grant signature and if the association covers the call (i.e. is retroactive and covers both the part of the programme and the year when the call was launched).

EU restrictive measures — Special rules apply for entities subject to [EU restrictive measures](#) under Article 29 of the Treaty on the European Union (TEU) and Article 215 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (TFEU)[69]. Such entities are not eligible to participate in any capacity, including as beneficiaries, affiliated entities, associated partners, subcontractors or recipients of financial support to third parties (if any).

EU conditionality measures — Special rules apply for entities subject to measures adopted on the basis of EU Regulation 2020/2092[70]. Such entities are not eligible to participate in any funded role (beneficiaries, affiliated entities, subcontractors, recipients of financial support to third parties, etc). Currently such measures are in place for Hungarian public interest trusts established under the Hungarian Act IX of 2021 or any entity they maintain (see [Council Implementing Decision (EU) 2022/2506](#), as of 16 December 2022).

For more information, *see [Rules for Legal Entity Validation, LEAR Appointment and Financial Capacity Assessment](#)*.

Consortium composition

Proposals must be submitted by:

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[67] See Article 200(2)(c) EU Financial Regulation [2024/2509](#).

[68] For the definitions, see Articles 190(2) and 200(2)(c) EU Financial Regulation [2024/2509](#).

[69] Please note that the EU Official Journal contains the official list and, in case of conflict, its content prevails over that of the [EU Sanctions Map](#).

[70] Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2020/2092 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 December 2020 on a general regime of conditionality for the protection of the Union budget (OJ L 325, 20.12.2022, p. 94).

for topic DIGITAL-2025-SKILLS-08-QUANTUM-ACADEMY-STEP — Sectoral digital skills academies: Quantum Skills Digital Academy

- Consortium composed of a minimum 5 entities (beneficiaries; not affiliated entities) from a minimum 3 different eligible countries.

for topic DIGITAL-2025-SKILLS-08-GENAI-ACADEMY-STEP— Sectoral digital skills academies: Digital Skills Academy in GenAI

- Consortium composed of a minimum 6 entities (beneficiaries; not affiliated entities) from a minimum 3 different eligible countries.

for topic DIGITAL-2025-SKILLS-08-VIRTUAL-WORLDS-ACADEMY-STEP — Sectoral digital skills academies: Virtual Worlds Skills Academy

- Consortium composed of a minimum of 6 (beneficiaries; not affiliated entities) from a minimum of 4 different eligible countries.

Eligible activities

Applications will only be considered eligible if their content corresponds wholly (or at least in part) to the topic description for which they are submitted.

Eligible activities are the ones set out in section 2 above.

Projects should take into account the results of projects supported by other EU funding programmes. The complementarities must be described in the project proposals (Part B of the Application Form).

Projects must comply with EU policy interests and priorities *(such as environment, social, security, industrial and trade policy, etc)*. Projects must also respect EU values and European Commission policy regarding reputational matters (*e.g. activities involving capacity building, policy support, awareness raising, communication, dissemination, etc*).

Financial support to third parties is allowed in topics DIGITAL-2025-SKILLS-08-QUANTUM-ACADEMY-STEP — Sectoral digital skills academies: Quantum Skills Digital Academy; DIGITAL-2025-SKILLS-08-GENAI-ACADEMY-STEP— Sectoral digital skills academies: Digital Skills Academy in GenAI and DIGITAL-2025-SKILLS-08-VIRTUAL-WORLDS-ACADEMY-STEP — Sectoral digital skills academies: Virtual Worlds Skills Academy for grants or similar forms of support and prizes under the following conditions:

- the calls must be open, published widely and conform to EU standards concerning transparency, equal treatment, conflict of interest and confidentiality
- the calls must be published on the Funding & Tenders Portal, and on the **participants'** websites
- the calls must remain open for at least two months
- if call deadlines are changed this must immediately be published on the Portal and all registered applicants must be informed of the change
- **the outcome of the call must be published on the participants' websites,** including a description of the selected projects, award dates, project durations, and final recipient legal names and countries
- the calls must have a clear European dimension.

Financial support to third parties (FSTP) will be accepted for all topics (DIGITAL-2025-SKILLS-08-QUANTUM-ACADEMY-STEP — Sectoral digital skills academies: Quantum

Skills Digital Academy; DIGITAL-2025-SKILLS-08-GENAI-ACADEMY-STEP— Sectoral digital skills academies: Digital Skills Academy in GenAI and DIGITAL-2025-SKILLS-08-VIRTUAL-WORLDS-ACADEMY-STEP — Sectoral digital skills academies: Virtual Worlds Skills Academy) in projects which use grants or similar and prizes to support students and participants to participate in the training programme(s), self-standing training modules, internships, fellowships, scholarships and apprenticeships. For the topic DIGITAL-2025-SKILLS-08-VIRTUAL-WORLDS-ACADEMY-STEP — Sectoral digital skills academies: Virtual Worlds Skills Academy FSTP could also take a form of prizes to promote the Virtual Worlds Skills Academy.

Your project application must clearly specify why financial support to third parties is needed, how it will be managed and provide a list of the different types of activities in line with Topic specific requirements for which a third party may receive financial support. The proposal must also clearly describe the results to be obtained.

Security

Projects involving EU classified information must undergo security scrutiny to authorise funding and may be made subject to specific security rules (detailed in a security aspects letter (SAL) which is annexed to the Grant Agreement).

These rules (governed by Decision 2015/444[71] and its implementing rules **and**/or national rules) provide for instance that:

- projects involving information classified TRES SECRET UE/EU TOP SECRET (or equivalent) can NOT be funded

- classified information must be marked in accordance with the applicable security instructions in the SAL

- information with classification levels CONFIDENTIEL UE/EU CONFIDENTIAL or above (and RESTREINT UE/ EU RESTRICTED, if required by national rules) may be:

    - created or accessed only on premises with facility security clearance (FSC) from the competent national security authority (NSA), in accordance with the national rules

    - handled only in a secured area accredited by the competent NSA

    - accessed and handled only by persons with valid personnel security clearance (PSC) and a need-to-know

- at the end of the grant, the classified information must either be returned or continue to be protected in accordance with the applicable rules

- action tasks involving EU classified information (EUCI) may be subcontracted only with prior written approval from the granting authority and only to entities established in an EU Member State or in a non-EU country with a security of information agreement with the EU (or an administrative arrangement with the Commission)

- disclosure of EUCI to third parties is subject to prior written approval from the granting authority.

Please note that, depending on the type of activity, facility security clearance may have to be provided before grant signature. The granting authority will assess the

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[71] See Commission Decision 2015/444/EU, Euratom of 13 March 2015 on the security rules for protecting EU classified information (OJ L 72, 17.3.2015, p. 53).

need for clearance in each case and will establish their delivery date during grant preparation. Please note that in no circumstances can we sign any grant agreement until at least one of the beneficiaries in a consortium has facility security clearance.

Further security recommendations may be added to the Grant Agreement in the form of security deliverables *(e.g. create security advisory group, limit level of detail, use fake scenario, exclude use of classified information, etc)*.

Beneficiaries must ensure that their projects are not subject to national/third-country security requirements that could affect implementation or put into question the award of the grant *(e.g. technology restrictions, national security classification, etc)*. The granting authority must be notified immediately of any potential security issues.

7. Financial and operational capacity and exclusion

Financial capacity

Applicants must have stable and sufficient resources to successfully implement the projects and contribute their share. Organisations participating in several projects must have sufficient capacity to implement all projects.

The financial capacity check will be carried out on the basis of the documents you will be requested to upload in the Participant Register during grant preparation *(e.g. profit and loss account and balance sheet, business plan, audit report produced by an approved external auditor, certifying the accounts for the last closed financial year, etc)*. The analysis will be based on neutral financial indicators, but will also take into account other aspects, such as dependency on EU funding and deficit and revenue in previous years.

The check will normally be done for all beneficiaries, except:

- public bodies (entities established as public body under national law, including local, regional or national authorities) or international organisations

- if the individual requested grant amount is not more than EUR 60 000.

If needed, it may also be done for affiliated entities.

If we consider that your financial capacity is not satisfactory, we may require:

- further information

- an enhanced financial responsibility regime, i.e. joint and several responsibility for all beneficiaries or joint and several liability of affiliated entities *(see below, section 10)*

- prefinancing paid in instalments

- (one or more) prefinancing guarantees *(see below, section 10)*

or

- propose no prefinancing

- request that you are replaced or, if needed, reject the entire proposal.

For more information, *see Rules for Legal Entity Validation, LEAR Appointment and Financial Capacity Assessment*.

Operational capacity

Applicants must have the know-how, qualifications and resources to successfully implement the projects and contribute their share (including sufficient experience in projects of comparable size and nature).

This capacity will be assessed together with **the 'Implementation' award criterion**, on the basis of the competence and experience of the applicants and their project teams, including operational resources (human, technical and other) or, exceptionally, the measures proposed to obtain it by the time the task implementation starts.

If the evaluation of the award criterion is positive, the applicants are considered to have sufficient operational capacity.

Applicants will have to show their capacity via the following information:

  − general profiles (qualifications and experiences) of the staff responsible for managing and implementing the project

  − description of the consortium participants

  − list of previous projects (key projects for the last 4 years) *(template available in Part B)*.

Additional supporting documents may be requested, if needed to confirm the operational capacity of any applicant.

Exclusion

Applicants which are subject to an EU exclusion decision or in one of the following exclusion situations that bar them from receiving EU funding can NOT participate[72]:

  − bankruptcy, winding up, affairs administered by the courts, arrangement with creditors, suspended business activities or other similar procedures (including **procedures for persons with unlimited liability for the applicant's debts)**

  − in breach of social security or tax obligations (including if done by persons with **unlimited liability for the applicant's debts)**

  − guilty of grave professional misconduct[73] (including if done by persons having powers of representation, decision-making or control, beneficial owners or persons who are essential for the award/implementation of the grant)

  − committed fraud, corruption, links to a criminal organisation, money laundering, terrorism-related crimes (including terrorism financing), child labour or human trafficking (including if done by persons having powers of representation, decision-making or control, beneficial owners or persons who are essential for the award/implementation of the grant*)*

  − shown significant deficiencies in complying with main obligations under an EU procurement contract, grant agreement, prize, expert contract, or similar (including if done by persons having powers of representation, decision-making or control, beneficial owners or persons who are essential for the award/implementation of the grant)

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[72] See Articles 138 and 143 of EU Financial Regulation 2024/2509.
[73] 'Professional **misconduct' includes, in particular, the** following: violation of ethical standards of the profession; wrongful conduct with impact on professional credibility; breach of generally accepted professional ethical standards; false declarations/misrepresentation of information; participation in a cartel or other agreement distorting competition; violation of IPR; attempting to influence decision-making processes by taking advantage, through misrepresentation, of a conflict of interests, or to obtain confidential information from public authorities to gain an advantage; incitement to discrimination, hatred or violence or similar activities contrary to the EU values where negatively affecting or risking to affect the performance of a legal commitment.

- guilty of irregularities within the meaning of Article 1(2) of EU Regulation [2988/95](including if done by persons having powers of representation, decision-making or control, beneficial owners or persons who are essential for the award/implementation of the grant)

- created under a different jurisdiction with the intent to circumvent fiscal, social or other legal obligations in the country of origin or created another entity with this purpose (including if done by persons having powers of representation, decision-making or control, beneficial owners or persons who are essential for the award/implementation of the grant)

- intentionally and without proper justification resisted[74] an investigation, check or audit carried out by an EU authorising officer (or their representative or auditor), OLAF, the EPPO, or the European Court of Auditors.

Applicants will also be rejected if it turns out that[75]:

- during the award procedure they misrepresented information required as a condition for participating or failed to supply that information

- they were previously involved in the preparation of the call and this entails a distortion of competition that cannot be remedied otherwise (conflict of interest).

8. Evaluation and award procedure

The proposals will have to follow the standard submission and evaluation procedure (one-stage submission + one-step evaluation).

An evaluation committee (assisted by independent outside experts) will assess all applications. Proposals will first be checked for formal requirements (admissibility, and eligibility, *see sections 5 and 6*). Proposals found admissible and eligible will be evaluated (for each topic) against the operational capacity and award criteria *(see sections 7 and 9)* and then ranked according to their scores.

For proposals with the same score (within a topic or budget envelope) a priority order will be determined according to the following approach:

Successively for every group of *ex aequo* proposals, starting with the highest scored group, and continuing in descending order:

1) Proposals focusing on a theme that is not otherwise covered by higher ranked proposals will be considered to have the highest priority.

2) The ex aequo proposals within the same topic will be prioritised according to **the scores they have been awarded for the award criterion 'Relevance'. When** these scores are equal, priority will be based on their scores for the criterion **'Impact'. When these scores are equal, priority will be based on their scores for the criterion 'Implementation'.**

3) If this does not allow to determine the priority, a further prioritisation can be done by considering the overall proposal portfolio and the creation of positive

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[74] 'Resisting an investigation, check or audit' means carrying out actions with the goal or effect of preventing, hindering or delaying the conduct of any of the activities needed to perform the investigation, check or audit, such as refusing to grant the necessary access to its premises or any other areas used for business purposes, concealing or refusing to disclose information or providing false information.

[75] See Article 143 EU Financial Regulation [2024/2509](.

synergies between proposals, or other factors related to the objectives of the call. These factors will be documented in the panel report.

4) After that, the remainder of the available call budget will be used to fund projects across the different topics in order to ensure a balanced spread of the geographical and thematic coverage and while respecting to the maximum possible extent the order of merit based on the evaluation of the award criteria.

All proposals will be informed about the evaluation result (evaluation result letter). Successful proposals will be invited for grant preparation; the other ones will be put on the reserve list or rejected.

All proposals in this call that are eligible and exceed the evaluation thresholds will be awarded a STEP Seal and will be listed on the STEP portal[76]. The STEP Seal[77] is a recognition given to projects that contribute to STEP objectives and meet the minimum quality criteria set by this call for proposals. The Seal is a quality label and a facilitator for accessing EU funds, making it easier for projects to receive alternative, combined cumulative funding from various EU budgetary instruments.

⚠ No commitment for funding — Invitation to grant preparation does NOT constitute a formal commitment for funding. We will still need to make various legal checks before grant award: *legal entity validation, financial capacity, exclusion check, etc.*

Grant preparation will involve a dialogue in order to fine-tune technical or financial aspects of the project and may require extra information from your side. It may also include adjustments to the proposal to address recommendations of the evaluation committee or other concerns. Full compliance will be a pre-condition for signing the grant.

If you believe that the evaluation procedure was flawed, you can submit a complaint (following the deadlines and procedures set out in the evaluation result letter). Please note that notifications which have not been opened within 10 days after sending will be considered to have been accessed and that deadlines will be counted from opening/access *(see also Funding & Tenders Portal Terms and Conditions)*. Please also be aware that for complaints submitted electronically, there may be character limitations.

9. Award criteria

The award criteria for this call are as follows:

1. **Relevance**

   – Alignment with the objectives and activities as described in section 2

   – Contribution to long-term policy objectives, relevant policies and strategies, and synergies with activities at European and national level

   – Extent to which the project would reinforce and secure the digital technology supply chain in the EU*

   – Extent to which the project can overcome financial obstacles such as the lack of market finance*

2. **Implementation**

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[76]   https://strategic-technologies.europa.eu/index_en
[77]   https://strategic-technologies.europa.eu/about/step-seal_en

–   Maturity of the project

–   Soundness of the implementation plan and efficient use of resources

–   Capacity of the applicants, and when applicable the consortium as a whole, to carry out the proposed work

3. **Impact**

–   Extent to which the project will achieve the expected outcomes and deliverables referred to in the call for proposals and, where relevant, the plans to disseminate and communicate project achievements

–   Extent to which the project will strengthen competitiveness and bring important benefits for society

–   Extent to which the project addresses environmental sustainability and the European Green Deal goals, in terms of direct effects and/or in awareness of environmental effects *.

May not be applicable to all topics (see specific topic conditions in section 2).

Award criteria	Minimum pass score	Maximum score
Relevance	3	5
Implementation	3	5
Impact	3	5
Overall (pass) scores	10	15

Maximum points: 15 points.

Individual thresholds per criterion: 3/5, 3/5 and 3/5 points.

Overall threshold: 10 points.

Proposals that pass the individual thresholds AND the overall threshold will be considered for funding — within the limits of the available budget (i.e. up to the budget ceiling). Other proposals will be rejected.

10. Legal and financial set-up of the Grant Agreements

If you pass evaluation, your project will be invited for grant preparation, where you will be asked to prepare the Grant Agreement together with the EU Project Officer.

This Grant Agreement will set the framework for your grant and its terms and conditions, in particular concerning deliverables, reporting and payments.

The Model Grant Agreement that will be used (and all other relevant templates and guidance documents) can be found on Portal Reference Documents.

Starting date and project duration

The project starting date and duration will be fixed in the Grant Agreement *(Data Sheet, point 1)*. Normally the starting date will be after grant signature. A retroactive

starting date can be granted exceptionally for duly justified reasons but never earlier than the proposal submission date.

Project duration:

- for topic DIGITAL-2025-SKILLS-08-QUANTUM-ACADEMY-STEP — Sectoral digital skills academies: Quantum Skills Digital Academy: 48 months

- for topic DIGITAL-2025-SKILLS-08-GENAI-ACADEMY-STEP— Sectoral digital skills academies: Digital Skills Academy in GenAI: indicative 48 months

- for topic DIGITAL-2025-SKILLS-08-VIRTUAL-WORLDS-ACADEMY-STEP — Sectoral digital skills academies: Virtual Worlds Skills Academy: 48 months

Extensions are possible, if duly justified and through an amendment.

Milestones and deliverables

The milestones and deliverables for each project will be managed through the Portal Grant Management System and will be reflected in Annex 1 of the Grant Agreement.

The following deliverables will be mandatory for all projects:

- additional deliverable on dissemination and exploitation, to be submitted in the first six months of the project

The following deliverables will be mandatory for the topic DIGITAL-2025-SKILLS-08-GENAI-ACADEMY-STEP:

- Sustainability plan

- Collaboration agreement between two parts of the AI Skills Academy

Form of grant, funding rate and maximum grant amount

The grant parameters *(maximum grant amount, funding rate, total eligible costs, etc)* will be fixed in the Grant Agreement *(Data Sheet, point 3 and art 5)*.

Project budget (requested grant amount):

- for topic DIGITAL-2025-SKILLS-08-QUANTUM-ACADEMY-STEP — Sectoral digital skills academies: Quantum Skills Digital Academy: max EUR 10 M per project

- for topic DIGITAL-2025-SKILLS-08-GENAI-ACADEMY-STEP — Sectoral digital skills academies: Digital Skills Academy in GenAI: max EUR 7 M per project

- for topic DIGITAL-2025-SKILLS-08-VIRTUAL-WORLDS-ACADEMY-STEP — Sectoral digital skills academies: Virtual Worlds Skills Academy: max EUR 10 M per project

The grant awarded may be lower than the amount requested.

The grant will be a lump sum grant. This means that it will reimburse a fixed amount, based on a lump sum or financing not linked to costs. The amount will be fixed by the granting authority on the basis of the estimated project budget and a funding rate of 50%

Budget categories and cost eligibility rules

The budget categories and cost eligibility rules are fixed in the Grant Agreement *(Data Sheet, point 3 and art 6)*.

Budget categories for this call:

- Lump sum contributions [78]

Specific cost eligibility rules for this call:

- the lump sum amount must be calculated based on estimated project budget (actual cost) and using the detailed budget table/calculator provided

- the lump sum calculation should respect the following conditions:

  - for lump sums based on estimated project budgets: the estimated budget must comply with the basic eligibility conditions for EU actual cost grants *(see AGA — Annotated Grant Agreement, art 6)*

  - for lump sums based on estimated project budgets: costs for financial support to third parties: can be included in the detailed budget table for grants or similar and prizes:

    - for topic DIGITAL-2025-SKILLS-08-QUANTUM-ACADEMY-STEP — Sectoral digital skills academies: Quantum Skills Digital Academy; maximum amount per third party EUR 60 000 unless a higher amount is required because the objective of the action would otherwise be impossible or overly difficult to achieve and this is duly justified in the Application Form. The total amount of the EU contribution for financial support to third parties can be maximum 20% of the requested EU funding.

    - for topic DIGITAL-2025-SKILLS-08-GENAI-ACADEMY-STEP — Sectoral digital skills academies: Digital Skills Academy in GenAI; maximum amount per third party EUR 60 000 unless a higher amount is required because the objective of the action would otherwise be impossible or overly difficult to achieve and this is duly justified in the Application Form. The total amount of the EU contribution for financial support to third parties can be maximum 20% of the requested EU funding.

    - for topic DIGITAL-2025-SKILLS-08-VIRTUAL-WORLDS-ACADEMY-STEP — Sectoral digital skills academies: Virtual Worlds Skills Academy; maximum amount per third party EUR 60 000 unless a higher amount is required because the objective of the action would otherwise be impossible or overly difficult to achieve and this is duly justified in the Application Form. The total amount of the EU contribution for financial support to third parties can be maximum 20% of the requested EU funding.

Reporting and payment arrangements

The reporting and payment arrangements are fixed in the Grant Agreement *(Data Sheet, point 4 and art 21 and 22)*.

After grant signature, you will normally receive a prefinancing to start working on the project (float of normally 65% of the maximum grant amount; exceptionally less

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[78] Decision of 31 March 2023 authorising the use of lump sum contributions under the Digital Europe Programme 2021-2027.

or no prefinancing). The prefinancing will be paid 30 days from entry into force/10 days before starting date/financial guarantee (if required) – whichever is the latest.

There will be one or more *interim payments* (with cost reporting through the use of resources report).

Payment of the balance: At the end of the project, we will calculate your final grant amount. If the total of earlier payments is higher than the final grant amount, we will ask you (your coordinator) to pay back the difference (recovery).

All payments will be made to the coordinator.

⚠ Please be aware that payments will be automatically lowered if you or one of your consortium members has outstanding debts towards the EU (granting authority or other EU bodies). Such debts will be offset by us — in line with the conditions set out in the Grant Agreement *(see art 22)*.

Please also note that you are responsible for keeping records on all the work done.

Prefinancing guarantees

If a prefinancing guarantee is required, it will be fixed in the Grant Agreement *(Data Sheet, point 4)*. The amount will be set during grant preparation and it will normally be equal or lower than the prefinancing for your grant.

The guarantee should be in euro and issued by an approved bank/financial institution established in an EU Member State. If you are established in a non-EU country and would like to provide a guarantee from a bank/financial institution in your country, please contact us (this may be exceptionally accepted, if it offers equivalent security).

Amounts blocked in bank accounts will NOT be accepted as financial guarantees.

Prefinancing guarantees are normally requested from the coordinator, for the consortium. They must be provided during grant preparation, in time to make the prefinancing (scanned copy via Portal AND original by post).

If agreed with us, the bank guarantee may be replaced by a guarantee from a third party.

The guarantee will be released at the end of the grant, in accordance with the conditions laid down in the Grant Agreement *(art 23)*.

Certificates

Depending on the type of action, size of grant amount and type of beneficiaries, you may be requested to submit different certificates. The types, schedules and thresholds for each certificate are fixed in the Grant Agreement *(Data Sheet, point 4 and art 24)*.

Liability regime for recoveries

The liability regime for recoveries will be fixed in the Grant Agreement *(Data Sheet, point 4.4 and art 22)*.

For beneficiaries, it is one of the following:

– limited joint and several liability with individual ceilings — *each beneficiary up to their maximum grant amount*

– unconditional joint and several liability — *each beneficiary up to the maximum*

grant amount for the action

 or

- individual financial responsibility — *each beneficiary only for their own debts.*

In addition, the granting authority may require joint and several liability of affiliated entities (with their beneficiary).

Provisions concerning the project implementation

Security rules: *see Model Grant Agreement (art 13 and Annex 5)*

Ethics rules: *see Model Grant Agreement (art 14 and Annex 5)*

IPR rules: *see Model Grant Agreement (art 16 and Annex 5):*

- background and list of background: Yes

- protection of results: Yes

- exploitation of results: Yes

- rights of use on results: Yes

- access to results for policy purposes: Yes

- access to results in case of a public emergency: Yes

- access rights to ensure continuity and interoperability obligations: Yes

Communication, dissemination and visibility of funding: *see Model Grant Agreement (art 17 and Annex 5):*

- communication and dissemination plan: Yes

- dissemination of results: Yes

- additional dissemination obligations: No

- additional communication activities: Yes

- special logo: No

Specific rules for carrying out the action: *see Model Grant Agreement (art 18 and Annex 5):*

- specific rules for PAC Grants for Procurement: No

- specific rules for Grants for Financial Support: No

- specific rules for blending operations: No

Other specificities

Consortium agreement: Yes

Non-compliance and breach of contract

The Grant Agreement (chapter 5) provides for the measures we may take in case of breach of contract (and other non-compliance issues).

For more information, *see AGA — Annotated Grant Agreement*.

11. How to submit an application

All proposals must be submitted directly online via the Funding & Tenders Portal Electronic Submission System. Paper applications are NOT accepted.

Submission is a 2-step process:

a) create a user account and register your organisation

To use the Submission System (the only way to apply), all participants need to create an EU Login user account.

Once you have an EULogin account, you can register your organisation in the Participant Register. When your registration is finalised, you will receive a 9-digit participant identification code (PIC).

b) submit the proposal

Access the Electronic Submission System via the Topic page in the Calls for proposals section (or, for calls sent by invitation to submit a proposal, through the link provided in the invitation letter).

Submit your proposal in 3 parts, as follows:

- Part A includes administrative information about the applicant organisations (future coordinator, beneficiaries, affiliated entities and associated partners) and the summarised budget for the proposal. Fill it in directly online

- Part B (description of the action) covers the technical content of the proposal. Download the mandatory word template from the Submission System, fill it in and upload it as a PDF file

- Annexes (*see section 5*). Upload them as PDF file (single or multiple depending on the slots). Excel upload is sometimes possible, depending on the file type.

The proposal must keep to the **page limits** *(see section 5)*; excess pages will be disregarded.

Documents must be uploaded to the right category in the Submission System, otherwise the proposal may be considered incomplete and thus inadmissible.

The proposal must be submitted **before the call deadline** (*see section 4*). After this deadline, the system is closed and proposals can no longer be submitted.

Once the proposal is submitted, you will receive a confirmation e-mail (with date and time of your application). If you do not receive this confirmation e-mail, it means your proposal has NOT been submitted. If you believe this is due to a fault in the Submission System, you should immediately file a complaint via the IT Helpdesk webform, explaining the circumstances and attaching a copy of the proposal (and, if possible, screenshots to show what happened).

Details on processes and procedures are described in the Online Manual. The Online Manual also contains the links to FAQs and detailed instructions regarding the Portal Electronic Exchange System.

12. Help

As far as possible, *please try to find the answers you need yourself*, in this and the other documentation (we have limited resources for handling direct enquiries):

- Online Manual

- Topic Q&A on the Topic page (for call-specific questions in open calls; not applicable for actions by invitation)

- Portal FAQ (for general questions).

Please also consult the Topic page regularly, since we will use it to publish call updates. (For invitations, we will contact you directly in case of a call update).

Contact

For individual questions on the Portal Submission System, please contact the IT Helpdesk.

Non-IT related questions should be sent to the following email address: Here

Please indicate clearly the reference of the call and topic to which your question relates (see cover page).

13. Important

⚠️ IMPORTANT

- **Don't wait** until the end **—** Complete your application sufficiently in advance of the deadline to avoid any last minute technical problems. Problems due to last minute submissions *(e.g. congestion, etc)* will be entirely at your risk. Call deadlines can NOT be extended.

- Consult the Portal Topic page regularly. We will use it to publish updates and additional information on the call (call and topic updates).

- Funding & Tenders Portal Electronic Exchange System **—** By submitting the application, all participants accept to use the electronic exchange system in accordance with the Portal Terms & Conditions.

- Registration **—** Before submitting the application, all beneficiaries, affiliated entities and associated partners must be registered in the Participant Register. The participant identification code (PIC) (one per participant) is mandatory for the Application Form.

- Consortium roles**—** When setting up your consortium, you should think of organisations that help you reach objectives and solve problems.

  The roles should be attributed according to the level of participation in the project. Main participants should participate as beneficiaries or affiliated entities; other entities can participate as associated partners, subcontractors, third parties giving in-kind contributions. Associated partners and third parties giving in-kind contributions should bear their own costs (they will not become formal recipients of EU funding). Subcontracting should normally constitute a limited part and must be performed by third parties (not by one of the beneficiaries/affiliated entities). Subcontracting going beyond 30% of the total eligible costs must be justified in the application.

- Coordinator **—** In multi-beneficiary grants, the beneficiaries participate as consortium (group of beneficiaries). They will have to choose a coordinator, who will take care of the project management and coordination and will represent the consortium towards the granting authority. In mono-beneficiary grants, the single beneficiary will automatically be coordinator.

- Affiliated entities **—** Applicants may participate with affiliated entities (i.e. entities linked to a beneficiary which participate in the action with similar rights and obligations as the beneficiaries, but do not sign the grant and therefore do not become beneficiaries themselves). They will get a part of the grant money and must therefore comply with all the call conditions and be validated (just like beneficiaries); but they do not count towards the minimum eligibility criteria for consortium composition (if any). If affiliated entities participate in your project, please do not forget to provide documents demonstrating their affiliation link to your organisation as part of your application.

- Associated partners **—** Applicants may participate with associated partners (i.e. partner organisations which participate in the action but without the right to get grant money). They participate without funding and therefore do not need to be validated.

- Consortium agreement **—** For practical and legal reasons it is recommended to set up internal arrangements that allow you to deal with exceptional or unforeseen circumstances (in all cases, even if not mandatory under the Grant Agreement). The consortium agreement also gives you the possibility to redistribute the grant money according to your own consortium-internal principles and parameters (for instance, one beneficiary can reattribute its grant money to another beneficiary). The consortium agreement thus allows you to customise the EU grant to the needs inside your consortium and can also help to protect you in case of disputes.

- Balanced project budget **—** Grant applications must ensure a balanced project budget and sufficient other resources to implement the project successfully *(e.g. own contributions, income generated by the action, financial contributions from third parties, etc)*. You may be requested to lower your estimated costs, if they are ineligible (including excessive).

- Completed/ongoing projects **—** Proposals for projects that have already been completed will be rejected; proposals for projects that have already started will be assessed on a case-by-case basis (in this case, no costs can be reimbursed for activities that took place before the project starting date/proposal submission).

- No-profit rule **—** Grants may NOT give a profit (i.e. surplus of revenues + EU grant over costs). This will be checked by us at the end of the project.

- No cumulation of funding/no double funding **—** It is strictly prohibited to cumulate **funding from the EU budget (except under 'EU Synergies actions').** Outside such Synergies actions, any given action may receive only ONE grant from the EU budget and cost items may under NO circumstances be declared under two EU grants; projects must be designed as different actions, clearly delineated and separated for each grant (without overlaps).

- Combination with EU operating grants **—** Combination with EU operating grants is possible, if the project remains outside the operating grant work programme and you make sure that cost items are clearly separated in your accounting and NOT declared twice *(see [AGA — Annotated Grant Agreement, art 6.2.E](#))*.

- Multiple proposals **—** Applicants may submit more than one proposal for *different* projects under the same call (and be awarded funding for them).

  Organisations may participate in several proposals.

  BUT: if there are several proposals for *very similar* projects, only one application will be accepted and evaluated; the applicants will be asked to withdraw the others (or they will be rejected).

- Resubmission **—** Proposals may be changed and re-submitted until the deadline for submission.

- Rejection **—** By submitting the application, all applicants accept the call conditions set out in this this Call document (and the documents it refers to). Proposals that do not comply with all the call conditions will be rejected. This applies also to **applicants: All applicants need to fulfil the criteria; if any one of them doesn't, they** must be replaced or the entire proposal will be rejected.

- Cancellation **—** There may be circumstances which may require the cancellation of the call. In this case, you will be informed via a call or topic update. Please note that cancellations are without entitlement to compensation.

- Language **—** You can submit your proposal in any official EU language (project abstract/summary should however always be in English). For reasons of efficiency, we strongly advise you to use English for the entire application. If you need the call documentation in another official EU language, please submit a request within 10 days after call publication (for the contact information, *see section 12*).

- Transparency — In accordance with Article 38 of the EU Financial Regulation, information about EU grants awarded is published each year on the Europa website.

  This includes:

  – beneficiary names

  – beneficiary addresses

  – the purpose for which the grant was awarded

  – the maximum amount awarded.

  The publication can exceptionally be waived (on reasoned and duly substantiated request), if there is a risk that the disclosure could jeopardise your rights and freedoms under the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights or harm your commercial interests.

- Data protection — The submission of a proposal under this call involves the collection, use and processing of personal data. This data will be processed in accordance with the applicable legal framework. It will be processed solely for the purpose of evaluating your proposal, subsequent management of your grant and, if needed, programme monitoring, evaluation and communication. Details are explained in the Funding & Tenders Portal Privacy Statement.

Annex 1

Digital Europe types of action

The Digital Europe Programme uses the following actions to implement grants:

Simple Grants

Description: Simple Grants (SIMPLE) are a flexible type of action used by a large variety of topics and can cover most activities. The consortium will mostly use personnel costs to implement action tasks, activities with third parties (subcontracting, financial support, purchase) are possible but should be limited.

Funding rate: 50%

Payment model: Prefinancing – (x) interim payment(s) – final payment

SME Support Actions

Description: SME Support Actions (SME) are a type of action primarily consisting of activities directly aiming to support SMEs involved in building up and the deployment of the digital capacities. This type of action can also be used if SMEs need to be in the consortium and make investments to access the digital capacities.

Funding rate: 50% except for SMEs where a rate of 75% applies

Payment model: Prefinancing – (x) interim payment(s) – final payment

Coordination and Support Actions (CSAs)

Description: Coordination and Support Actions (CSAs) are a small type of action (a typical amount of 1-2 Mio) with the primary goal to support EU policies. Activities can include coordination between different actors for accompanying measures such as standardisation, dissemination, awareness-raising and communication, networking, coordination or support services, policy dialogues and mutual learning exercises and studies, including design studies for new infrastructure and may also include complementary activities of strategic planning, networking and coordination between programmes in different countries.

Funding rate: 100%

Payment model: Prefinancing – (x) interim payment(s) – final payment

Grants for Procurement

Description: Grants for Procurement (GP) are a special type of action where the main goal of the action (and thus the majority of the costs) consist of buying goods or services and/or subcontracting tasks. Contrary to the PAC Grants for Procurement *(see below)* there are no specific procurement rules (i.e. usual rules for purchase apply), nor is there a limit to 'contracting authorities/entities'. Personnel costs should be limited in this type of action; they are in general used to manage the grant, coordination between the beneficiaries, preparation of the procurements.

Funding rate: 50%

Payment model: Prefinancing - second prefinancing (to provide the necessary cash-flow to finance the procurements) – payment of the balance

PAC Grants for Procurement

Description: PAC Grants for Procurement (PACGP) are a specific type of action for procurement in grant agreements by 'contracting authorities/enti**ties'** as defined in the EU Public Procurement Directives (Directives 2014/24/EU , 2014/25/EU and 2009/81/EC) aiming at innovative digital goods and services (i.e. novel technologies on the way to commercialisation but not yet broadly available).

Funding rate: 50%

Payment model: Prefinancing - second prefinancing (to provide the necessary cash-flow to finance the procurements) – payment of the balance

Grants for Financial Support

Description: Grants for Financial Support (GfS) have a particular focus on cascading grants. The majority of the grant will be distributed via financial support to third parties with special provisions in the grant agreement, maximum amounts to third parties, multiple pre-financing and reporting obligations.

Annex 5 of the model grant agreements foresees specific rules for this type of action regarding conflict of interest, the principles of transparency, non-discrimination and sound financial management as well as the selection procedure and criteria.

In order to assure the co-financing obligation in the programme, the support to third parties should only cover 50% of third party costs.

Funding rate: 100% for the consortium, co-financing of 50% by the supported third party

Payment model: Prefinancing - second prefinancing (to provide the necessary cash-flow to finance sub-grants) – payment of the balance

Lump Sum Grants

Description: Lump Sum Grants (LS) reimburse a general lump sum for the entire project and the consortium as a whole. The lump sum is fixed ex-ante (at the latest at grant signature). on the basis of a methodology defined by the granting authority (either on the basis of a detailed project budget or other pre-defined parameters). The lump sum will cover all **the beneficiaries' direct and indirect costs** for the project. The beneficiaries do not need to report actual costs, they just need to claim the lump sum once the work is done. If the action is not properly implemented only part of the lump sum will be paid.

Funding rate: 50%

Payment model: Prefinancing – interim payment(s)– final payment

Framework Partnerships (FPAs) and Specific Grants (SGAs)

FPAs

Description: FPAs establish a long-term cooperation mechanism between the granting authority and the beneficiaries of grants. The FPA specifies the common objectives (action plan) and the procedure for awarding specific grants. The specific grants are awarded via identified beneficiary actions (with or without competition).

Funding rate: no funding for FPA

SGAs

Description: The SGAs are linked to an FPA and implement the action plan (or part of it). They are awarded via an invitation to submit a proposal (identified beneficiary action). The consortium composition should in principle match (meaning that only entities that are part of the FPA can participate in an SGA), but otherwise the implementation is rather flexible. FPAs and SGAs can have different coordinators ; other partners of the FPA are free to participate in an SGA or not. There is no limit to the amount of SGAs signed under one FPA.

Funding rate: 50%

Payment model: Prefinancing – (x) interim payment(s) – final payment

<div align="right">Annex 2</div>

Eligibility restrictions under Articles 12(5) and (6) and 18(4) of the Digital Europe Regulation

Security restrictions Article 12(5) and (6)

If indicated in the Digital Europe Work Programme, and if justified for security reasons, topics can exclude the participation of legal entities *established* in a third country or DEP associated country, or established in the EU territory but *controlled* by a third country or third country legal entities (including DEP associated countries)[79].

This restriction is applicable for SO1 (High Performance Computing), SO2 (Artificial Intelligence) and SO3 (Cybersecurity), but at different levels.

— In the case of SO3, the provision is implemented in the strictest way. When activated, only entities established in the EU AND controlled from the EU will be able to participate; entities from associated countries (which are normally eligible) can NOT participate — unless otherwise provided in the Work Programme.

— In SO1 and SO2, entities established in associated countries and entities controlled from non-EU countries may participate, if they comply with the conditions set out in the Work Programme (usually:

— for the associated countries: be formally associated to Digital Europe Programme and receive a positive assessment by the Commission on the replies to their associated country security questionnaire.

— for the participants: submission of a guarantee demonstrating that they have taken measures to ensure that their participation does not contravene security or EU strategic autonomy interests).

⚠ EEA countries (and participants from EEA countries) are exempted from these restrictions (and additional requirements) because EEA countries benefit from a status equivalent to the Member States.

In order to determine the ownership and control status, participants[80] will be required to fill in and submit an ownership control declaration*as part of the proposal (and later on be requested to submit supporting documents) *(see Guidance on participation in DEP, HE, EDF and CEF-DIG restricted calls)*.

In addition, where a guarantee is required, the participants will also have to fill in the guarantee template*, approved by the competent authorities of their country of establishment, and submit it to the granting authority which will assess its validity.

The activation of these restrictions will also make a number of specific provisions in the Grant Agreement applicable, such as country restrictions for eligible costs, country restrictions for subcontracting, and special rules for implementation, exploitation of results and transfers and exclusive licensing of results.

Thus:

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[79] See Article 12(5) and (6) of the Digital Europe Regulation 2021/694.
[80] Beneficiaries and affiliated entities, associated partners and subcontractors — except for entities that are validated as public bodies by the Central Validation Service.

– participation in any capacity (as beneficiary, affiliated entity, associated partner, subcontractor or recipient of financial support to third parties) is also limited to entities established in and controlled from eligible countries

– project activities (included subcontracted work) must take place in eligible countries

– the Grant Agreement provides for specific IPR restrictions.

Strategic autonomy restrictions Article 18(4)

If indicated in the Digital Europe Work Programme, calls can limit the participation to entities *established* in the EU, and/or entities established in third countries associated to the programme for EU strategic autonomy reasons[81].

The activation of these restrictions will make a number of specific provisions in the Grant Agreement applicable, such as country restrictions for eligible costs, country restrictions for subcontracting, and special rules for implementation, exploitation of results and transfers and exclusive licensing of results.

For more information, *see Guidance on participation in DEP, HE, EDF and CEF-DIG restricted calls*.

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[81] See Article 18(4) of the Digital Europe Regulation 2021/694.