Second “Grand Challenge Initiative” of the BERLIN UNIVERSITY ALLIANCE CALL FOR PROPOSALS

“Determinants of Global Health: Exploring Biological, Human-made & Environmental Factors”

Exploration Projects within the Grand Challenge Initiative Global Health

Call opens: April 26, 2021, 3 p.m.
Call closes: July 19, 2021, 3 p.m.
Earliest start of funding: February 1, 2022
Duration: 3 years
Funding volume: up to € 450,000 per annum

Berlin University Alliance Grand Challenge Initiative Global Health

Through the founding of the Berlin University Alliance, Freie Universität Berlin (FU Berlin), Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin (HU Berlin), Technische Universität Berlin (TU Berlin), and Charité – Universitätsmedizin Berlin have set themselves the ambitious joint goal of establishing Berlin as an integrated environment of research dedicated to addressing global challenges – Grand Challenges – in a unique way. The Berlin University Alliance (BUA) initiatives and measures are realized within the 5 goals of the Alliance, which were determined as crucial parameters in shaping an integrated research environment: 1 – Focusing on Grand Challenges, 2 – Fostering Knowledge Exchange, 3 – Advancing Research Quality and Value, 4 – Promoting Talent, and 5 – Sharing Resources. In order to implement these goals in the best sustainable way, they are framed by three Cross-Cutting Themes: Diversity and Gender Equality, Teaching and Learning, and Internationalization.

In its second ‘Grand Challenge Initiative’, the BUA addresses the field of Global Health with an emphasis on both global needs for new holistic health concepts and valuable scientific contributions that all Berlin-based stakeholders can make.

With the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, the relevance, scope and complexity of Global Health has become strikingly clear, as have the many opportunities in Global Health for inter- and transdisciplinary research and intervention. As an emerging discipline, Global Health addresses human health and One Health issues in a transnational and global perspective, and focuses particularly on the interdependencies between globalization, health and health determinants, with a special emphasis on and commitment to the reduction of health disparities.1 It also acknowledges that global health research and interventions often take place in postcolonial settings and in contexts of high social and institutional inequality. As such, Global Health requires multinational and multidisciplinary collaboration in order to understand – and act upon – the inseparable interconnections between the medical, biological, psychological, social, cultural, political, economic, and environmental determinants of human health and wellbeing.

This BUA call “Global Health: Exploring Biological, Human-made & Environmental Factors” follows an integral understanding of health and will include some of the most important facets, such as:

- Barriers to health protection: e.g. antimicrobial and vaccine resistance

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- Emerging health threats: e.g. pandemic preparedness and response
- Urban Physical & Mental Health: e.g. urbanization, migration, culture, societal transformation
- Planetary health challenges: e.g. health effects of climate and biodiversity changes
- Managing Global Health: e.g. governance, economy, health systems, community participation

**Objective of the funding program**

Exploration Projects aim to establish inter- and transdisciplinary research groups in Berlin dedicated to issues of societal relevance which coordinate and link the research undertaken by members of the Berlin University Alliance. In doing so, they contribute to the development of the Grand Challenge Initiatives of the Alliance and strengthen Berlin as a center of research. We are convinced that Grand Challenges such as Global Health can only be managed through the cooperation of research, society, politics, economy, and culture.

The Berlin University Alliance is funding Exploration Projects on **Determinants of Global Health** within its second Grand Challenge Initiative. In particular, the Alliance aims to address the most pertinent challenges for Global Health by analyzing current relevant questions and influencing factors for human health from a holistic and interdisciplinary perspective. To this end, the Alliance facilitates top-level research to develop recommendations and new approaches for tackling those challenges.

Exploration Projects must use interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches to integrate different perspectives and knowledge stocks to ensure excellent science as well as to develop robust ideas for societal solutions.

**Interdisciplinarity** in research is constitutive of the interaction of several disciplines that work on a common question or problem in an in-depth examination of the findings, methods and research perspectives of the respective disciplines involved and strive for a synthesis of their results.

**Transdisciplinarity** means not to remain thematically and methodologically in a single discipline or in the academic world, but to formulate and work on research questions from several perspectives in critical reflection with non-scientists/non-academic partners.

The overarching aim is to develop an adequate approach toward tackling Global Health determinants. For this, it is essential to understand the preconditions, dynamics, perspectives and limitations of this aim and to establish suitable long-term and impactful research programs. The Exploration Projects will also contribute to making Berlin an internationally visible center for cutting-edge research on Global Health determinants.

Accordingly, funding is focused on topics that require new and innovative methods, questions, work directions, and formats. Global Health is an emerging research field, and its subject matter is highly complex. In this regard, the Alliance is explicitly supporting high-risk undertakings with experimental and non-conventional approaches. We welcome proposals that ask the right questions, directly confront complexity as well as diversity, and design the right investigative approaches, even if this stretches the bounds of conventional research, and even if it carries a risk of failure. At the same time, the funded Exploration Projects should aim toward the development of long-term, sustainable research projects, and financing structures.

**Purpose of the funding program**

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The funded Exploration Projects will work at the interface between the different perspectives of medicine, natural sciences, social sciences, humanities, technical, and environmental sciences. This will help to create a broader understanding of the current challenges in Global Health determinants and provide the basis for networking activities needed to adequately address current major questions.

Proposals within this funding program must state clearly how their approach addresses at least two of the following challenges that have been highlighted by the Rockefeller Lancet Commission for Planetary Health⁴:

1. Imagination challenges (relating to new ways of thinking, conceptualizing and addressing complex, multi-disciplinary problems);
2. Knowledge challenges (relating to better understanding the shaping of human health through social and environmental processes, their implications for health risks and planetary futures);
3. Implementation challenges (relating to solutions and strategies for socially and environmentally sustainable lifestyles, the ability to account for uncertainty in policy and decision-making frameworks, sustainable management of common goods, time lags between action and effect).

In keeping with its cross-cutting theme of ‘diversity and gender equality’, the Berlin University Alliance’s Exploration Projects must examine the relevance of social inequality and discrimination for Global Health, taking into account an intersectional approach that considers the intertwining of diversity dimensions. Projects should also state their commitment to a research culture which strives for diversity in the research team as well as values diversity of opinions, perspectives, and experiences. The Alliance’s Exploration Projects should aim for advancing an integrative academic community in which all members are equally valued and integrated, and able to pursue their intellectual goals.

Reflecting the Berlin University Alliance’s internationalization strategy, the Exploration Projects should also serve to strengthen international partnerships. This includes in particular the collaboration with institutions and communities in the Global South as well as with the Alliance’s Strategic Partners, the University of Oxford, the University of Melbourne and the National University of Singapore (NUS). An application within the BUA-NUS “Joint Call for Research Proposals – Global Health Initiative” is complementary to the Call for Exploration Projects within the Grand Challenge Initiative Global Health. Similarly, the joint call for proposals on Global Health of the “OX|BUA Centre for Advanced Studies” flanks the activities funded in this initiative.

It is intended that two Exploration Projects will be jointly tendered with the strategic international partners of the Berlin University Alliance. The call for a joint BUA-NUS Exploration Project is planned to be issued in September 2021. Further information will be available on the BUA website (www.berlin-university-alliance.de) soon.

Fostering knowledge exchange and Teaching and Learning constitute key activities of the Berlin University Alliance. It is an explicit aim to boost capacity-building within the setting of our research. Initiatives for exchange formats and innovative teaching and training practices – as well as suggestions for their funding beyond this particular program – are therefore most welcome in the context of the Grand Challenge Initiatives’ call as they present attractive incentives for collaboration with international partners such as those of the Global South.

The funding program of the Berlin University Alliance’s Grand Challenge Initiative Global Health supports Exploration Projects which pursue novel research topics on the principle of close inter- and transdisciplinary collaboration. Funding is targeted towards projects aiming to implement interdisciplinary approaches, transcending the borders between disciplines and their different methodological and conceptual frameworks. Transdisciplinary of research approaches e.g., by collaboration with partners from NGOs, the economic sector, and relevant societal stakeholders – as

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⁴ Whitmee et al. 2015; *Lancet*, 386(10007):1973-2028; doi: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(15)60901-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(15)60901-1)
well as with the target communities of health research and interventions – is a necessary funding criterion.

Nature, scope and level of funding
Exploration Projects are based on a three-year funding period. The funding period may not be extended. Projects qualify for approval if the applicants convincingly demonstrate that they will address issues by developing perspectives, networks and ideas for application, creating a new and sustainable area of research. Funding of an Exploration Project allows exploring the long-term sustainability and impact of an idea. Projects may be extended in the event of absenteeism due to sickness or family matters (pregnancy, parental leave etc.). No additional funding will be made available, however, for any such extensions.

A maximum of 450,000 euros per annum is available for each Exploration Project i.e., a total of 1.35 million euros for the three-year funding period. Funding will be made available to the member institutions of the Berlin University Alliance for this purpose as budget resources.

Based on the budgetary requirements of the particular Alliance institution, funding may be applied for covering resources for academic staff (including student staff) and, to a lesser degree, for non-academic staff, for equipment and investment resources (excluding construction costs) as well as rental costs. Funding is also made available for networking and activities benefitting public relations.

Doctoral candidates can be employed as part of an Exploration Project on the condition that their contract will be guaranteed for the entire duration of the project. For cases in which the doctoral phase exceeds the period for a doctorate of three years covered by the project, proof of financing for the doctoral candidate beyond the duration of the project must be provided.

Coordinative tasks are to be undertaken by academic staff; positions for office staff may not be applied for within this funding scheme. Funding is provided as university budget (“Haushaltsmittel”), meaning that the German law on fixed-term contracts in academia (Wissenschaftszeitvertragsgesetz, WissZeitVG) applies to staff employed as “Wissenschaftliche Mitarbeiter” and these positions come with a teaching obligation (“Lehrdeputat”).

While funds cannot be transferred to international partners, there is the possibility of including them by several means e.g., through workshops, visiting fellowships or by connecting them to existing projects/partnerships.

A budget plan must be provided confirming how funding will be divided among the Alliance institutions participating in the application (a template is available on the Alliance website). It is not possible to make substantial changes to this once funding has been approved. Funding of applicants’ own positions is only possible for early career researchers, but not if they are the main applicant (see below).

Funding may be carried over to the next financial year up to a maximum of 20% of the annual total for the duration of the project if requested by September 1 of the running year.

Requirements / Eligibility
Professors and postdoctoral researchers working at Alliance institutions (Freie Universität Berlin, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Technische Universität Berlin, and Charité – Universitätsmedizin) are eligible to apply. Financing of all members of the applying consortium must be ensured for the entire duration of the project (by means of a work contract). Confirmation that positions are guaranteed until the end of the project must be appended to the proposal (please use provided document, signed by the corresponding dean, president or chair of a board).

Applying postdoctoral researchers in the early phases of their careers are required to provide proof of academic independence according to the criteria of their discipline (e.g., junior research group leader, Emmy Noether Groups etc.). Qualification phases for post-docs are particularly desirable as
part of the application process. It is also possible for applicants at this stage of their careers to obtain financing for their position if they make a strong enough case, but not if they are the main applicant.

Researchers from Germany and abroad as well as partners from industry can participate in projects as co-applicants but are not eligible for funding. Members of non-university research institutions in Berlin which are not affiliated to the Alliance institutions may participate only as cooperation partners and must provide their own funding. Any third-party co-applicants must provide proof of their own funding contribution when submitting their proposal (this can include funding for their own position). It is also possible to nominate additional external cooperation partners. These partners are not required to present proof of their funding contribution. Depending on the procurement laws for budgets at the individual Alliance institutions, it may also be possible to commission work from external sources.

Affiliated institutes (German ‘An-Institute’) are not per se eligible to apply. Individual people e.g., professors at an ‘An-Institut’ affiliated with an Alliance institution are, however, eligible to apply. Doctoral candidates and individuals who have completed their doctorates but are still awaiting doctoral certificates (Dr. Designatus) are not eligible to apply.

Group applications must consist of at least 6 and no more than 12 researchers. The consortium must include applicants from at least two Alliance institutions. In the interests of advancing the careers of early career scientists, it is desirable that the application consortium includes at least one researcher at an early stage of their career (post-doc, junior professor or W2 professor). Nevertheless, in the interests of sustainability, it is important that applicants are available to participate in the long-term realization of the project. Consortia must aim toward a gender balanced and diverse composition of the research team.

It is not possible to participate in more than one project within this call on Exploration Projects on Global Health determinants.

**Application procedure**

Please submit proposals in English.

Proposals have to be submitted via the following online portal: https://portal.bihealth.de/Portal/SitePages/Home.aspx

If you intend to submit a proposal, we kindly request you to inform us of this in sufficient time (by June 1, 2021) so that we can arrange suitable external reviewers for your proposal. Please write an e-mail to grand-challenges@berlin-university-alliance.de and provide the following information:

- a provisional list of PIs
- a preliminary project title, including an acronym (if applicable)
- the topic of your proposal (Please include 5 major ‘keywords’ in order for us to classify your research topic).

The proposal must include:

1. **Proposal**
   - Presentation of the question and objectives of the Exploration Project as it relates to the topic of Global Health determinants.
   - Presentation of thematic, conceptual and methodological research gap
   - Presentation of the main interdisciplinary perspectives and the transdisciplinary approaches to be pursued i.e., a demonstration of how the following criteria are reflected in the research design:

   **Criteria for interdisciplinary project work:**
• Please outline how the various scientific disciplines will collaborate in the different project phases and how you manage the process to integrate disciplinary knowledge into interdisciplinary knowledge.

Criteria for transdisciplinary project work:

• Please describe which non-scientific actors you involve in the process and why exactly these actors are relevant for the proposed project.

• Please describe how you will ensure the integration of scientific and non-scientific actors in the research process, in particular with regard to the joint problem definition, conception and implementation of the project.

• Please explain both the scientific questions and the societal challenges for which you want to find answers or solutions in the project.

• Please explain possible ways of sustaining your research results—both from a scientific and a practical perspective.
  
  o Presentation of the planned procedure, including schedule and work packages/contributions of each applicant
  
  o Details regarding quality assurance, including criteria for monitoring quality assurance
  
  o Details of diversity strategies and measures
  
  o Details of open access strategies and measures
  
  o Presentation of how the project will contribute to the goals of the Exploration Projects (i.e., convincing presentation of the development of a new, highly relevant research topic on the determinants of global health in Berlin in inter- and transdisciplinary cooperation, compare above: ‘Objective of the funding program’) 
  
  o Presentation of how the project will contribute to fostering knowledge exchange between science and society
  
  o Output and sustainability strategy or perspectives for anchoring the project (e.g., long-term research strategy or plans for anchoring the project and obtaining subsequent third-party funding)

2. Further documents to be submitted

  o Short applicant CVs focusing on their five most important publications on the topic to be addressed by the project
  
  o Cost projection including an explanation and justification of costs as well as details of co-financing by the participating institutions or third-party funding
  
  o List of cooperation partners
  
  o Index of cited literature
  
  o Statement provided by the relevant dean’s office or equivalent institute concerning basic equipment (rooms etc.)

A form for applicants can be found online on the BUA homepage. Further details are provided in the online portal.

Selection procedure

Projects are assessed in a multi-stage process.

1. An initial check for completeness of submitted documents and formal fulfillment of eligibility criteria is carried out by the Office for Grand Challenge Initiatives of the Berlin University Alliance. In case of formal deficiencies, the applicant has the possibility to correct the deficiencies.
2. After the initial check, all proposals will be assessed in a written review by international experts in the field of Global Health and international experts on transdisciplinary research. The review is based on scores and explanations of the eligibility criteria (see below) as well as an overall numerical rating of the application.

3. Based on scores received in the written review the internal expert committee ‘Global Health’ of the Berlin University Alliance, advised by the steering committees of Objective 1 ‘Focusing on Grand Challenges, and Objective 2, ‘Fostering Knowledge Exchange’ as well as one additional member of the other BUA steering committees, will create a shortlist of up to 10 proposals.

4. These will be invited to a digital expert talk and discussion to be held in September 2021. The PIs will discuss their projects with a selection committee consisting of international experts in the field of Global Health and in transdisciplinary research. The selection committee will be advised by the internal expert committee “Global Health” and some steering committee members of the different objectives and cross-cutting themes of the Berlin University Alliance to ensure the best possible compliance to all goals set by the Alliance.

Based on the written and scored reviews and the scientific talk the selection committee will develop the final ranking and funding recommendation in a closed session. The funding recommendation is recorded and documented. The Executive Board will make the final funding decision.

It is planned to fund up to six projects, including two joint projects with the Alliance’s strategic international partners. The earliest start of funding will be February 1, 2022.

**Funding criteria**

In addition to excellence in research, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research approaches (as described above) are of particular importance for the Exploration Projects funding program.

Essential funding criteria are:

- Compliance with the goals stated in the call text for Exploration Projects on Global Health (i.e., convincing presentation of the development of a new, highly relevant research topic in Berlin in inter- and transdisciplinary cooperation)

- Research
  - Quality of the research project (scientific relevance of the topic, topicality, originality, long-term perspective, preliminary results, and/or previous work)
  - Interdisciplinarity of the project (composition of the team and cooperation of the subprojects throughout the Alliance institutions, methods and formats of knowledge integration, and synthesis of results)
  - Transdisciplinarity of the project (integration of non-scientific expertise into the research process, methods and formats of the integration of non-scientific knowledge, description of the scientific and societal questions within the project, approaches for the sustainability of the project results and/or societal inclusion)
  - Objectives and coherence of the work program, conclusiveness of the project structure, cooperation between the disciplines, added value of the cooperation
  - Diversity of the group composition (in terms of involvement of different interest groups)

- Qualification of the applicants
  - Expertise and track record in the relevant topic or related topics

- Promotion of equal opportunities and diversity (e.g., gender balance, inclusion of LGBTQ+ people, international people, disabled people; governance of the project; if applicable: study participants, planned accessibility of content, governance bodies etc.)

- Involvement and support of junior researchers
- Adequacy of the funds applied for
- Management, quality assurance
  - Adequacy of data collection and access; if applicable: quality of data management plan; realistic planning of work, of time and of milestones; realistic planning of dissemination of research results
- Science communication, adequate measures of fostering knowledge exchange between science and society
- Contribution to one or more of the Alliance’s Cross-Cutting Themes (Diversity and Gender Equality, Teaching and Learning, Internationalization)

**Contact**
The central contact for your questions is the academic coordinator of the grand challenge initiative Global Health at grand-challenges@berlin-university-alliance.de.

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