FAQ

What is a Grand Challenge Initiative (GCI)?

The Alliance understands Grand Challenges as complex problems involving a broad range of interrelated phenomena from different realms of society and a large variety of disciplines and stakeholders. The focus of the Grand Challenges Initiatives is on researching and solving issues that are of global importance and that can be advanced through the expertise of Berlin researchers. Over the course of the initial funding period, the Alliance intends to introduce three GCIs. The first was Social Cohesion (GCI1), the second deals with the topic of Global Health (GCI2), and the third will be developed in a bottom up process together with science and society.

What is the goal of an Exploration Project?

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.

The funding focuses on thematic approaches that leave established research paths behind. Novel questions are worked on, if necessary also by innovative methods, in inter- and transdisciplinary teams. The interdisciplinary composition should deviate from established and proven subject partnerships. Transdisciplinarity means that within the Exploration Projects researchers formulate and work on research questions from several perspectives in critical reflection with non-scientists/non-academic partners. The Alliance explicitly supports high-risk projects. At the same time, the funded Exploration Project should enable the development of long-term research projects and financing structures.

What is the underlying understanding of Global Health within the call for Exploration Projects?

Global Health is the second Grand Challenge Initiative to which the Berlin University Alliance is dedicated.

Global Health focuses particularly on the interdependencies between globalization, health and health determinants, with a special emphasis on and commitment to the reduction of health disparities. In this, Global Health addresses health issues in a transnational and global perspective. As such, Global Health requires multinational and interdisciplinary collaboration in order to understand – and act upon – the inseparable interconnections between the medical, social, biological, cultural, political, economic, and environmental determinants of human health.

Global Health is studied and practiced mainly at the population level to promote people’s health, prevent, treat, and manage infectious and non-communicable diseases to achieve the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. It strives to promote healthy living environments, establish more equitable and accessible health systems as well as just and participatory conditions in health care and health research in an interconnected world. In short, Global Health is both an aim to work towards, and an essential precondition for, individual and collective security, stability and prosperity worldwide.

Does the project have to be interdisciplinary?

Yes, monodisciplinary applications will not be considered for funding.
**Does the project have to be transdisciplinary?**

Yes, projects without transdisciplinary approaches will not be considered by funding.

**What does „transdisciplinary“ mean?**

Transdisciplinarity is an integrative research approach that addresses societal problems through interdisciplinary collaborations as well as cooperation between researchers and non-scientific/non-academic partners. Ideally, the knowledge of the various actors is already incorporated into the description of challenges and the definition of research questions. The goals are 1) to enable and foster mutual learning processes between science and society and 2) to integrate the knowledge of all involved actors (scientific knowledge as well as practical knowledge for action).

**Recommend readings:**


[Network for Transdisciplinary Research](#): further information on transdisciplinary research.

A webinar on transdisciplinary research is planned for interested applicants on May 28 and June 14 (both 10-11:30 am). The Webinar is offered by the team of the measure „Research Forums“ [Objective 2: Fostering Knowledge Exchange](#). The Webinar will be held in English.

Registration: Please send an email with the subject line “Registration Webinar” to [globalhealth-forum@berlin-university-alliance.de](mailto:globalhealth-forum@berlin-university-alliance.de) and include your name, your organization, and the date you would like to attend.

The number of participants is limited. We ask for an early and binding registration. If the webinar is fully booked, we will put you on a waiting list and let you know if a place becomes available.

**What could transdisciplinary cooperation look like?**

There are many ways to design transdisciplinary collaboration. The actors can come from the fields of industry, art and culture, politics and civil society. From a methodological point of view, all ways and forms of collaboration are possible. It is important to involve the actors at an early stage: the scientific and non-scientific actors should be integrated in the research process, in particular with regard to the joint problem definition, conception and implementation of the project. In addition, cooperation at eye level plays a central role. The research process should integrate scientific and practical perspectives: formats can be freely chosen.

**Recommend readings:**

[td-net toolbox](#): concrete ideas for methods and tools for co-producing knowledge.

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**Do the Exploration Projects have to be interconnected? Do they have to cooperate? Is this an advantage for the application?**

It is not expected that the applicants' consortia are linked to those of other project proposals. Nevertheless, this can be useful if this makes it (more) recognizable how the project application(s) contribute(s) to the development of a Berlin approach to investigating determinants of Global Health.

**What is meant by the Berlin approach to investigating determinants of Global Health?**

*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.

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.

Ultimately, the *Exploration Projects* will contribute to making Berlin an internationally visible center for cutting-edge research on Global Health determinants.

**Who can apply for an Exploration Project?**

All postdoctoral academic members of the Berlin University Alliance are eligible to apply (cf. DFG guidelines). Postdoctoral researchers applying for funding must already demonstrate scientific independence according to relevant programs (e.g. junior research group leader, Emmy-Noether groups, etc.) or according to the criteria of their discipline. Appropriate evidence and explanations must be submitted.

Visiting professors are not eligible to apply. S-professorships or temporary professorships, on the other hand, are.

A valid employment contract of at least 50% with a collaborative institution is decisive for eligibility to apply.

The funding of the position must be demonstrably secured over the entire course of the project (employment contract). If the employment contract is not guaranteed until the expected end of the project, a letter from the institute management or the dean's office can be attached regarding the effort to provide employment for this person until the end of the project.

**How many researchers should work within a consortium?**

Applicant groups must consist of a minimum of six scientists and a maximum of 12 researchers. These numbers are to be understood as fixed lower and upper limits. Applicants from at least two institutions of the Berlin University Alliance must be involved as applicants.

**Can I participate within more than one consortium?**

No. Each eligible applicant can only participate in one application within the framework of the Exploration Projects Global Health call.

This also applies in the event that a PI wishes to act as a collaborative partner in another project.
Can I apply for personnel for coordination positions?

Coordinating tasks are to be performed by scientific staff. For this purpose, no separate positions for additional staff may be applied for, nor may partial funding of a scientific position be claimed.

Are affiliated institutes (“An-Institute”) eligible for funding?

An-Institutes are not eligible to apply. Individuals, e.g. professors of an “An-Institut” with affiliation to an institution of the Berlin University Alliance are eligible to apply through this institution.

In what way does the promotion of young researchers play a role in the Exploration Projects?

With its Objective *Promoting Talent*, the Berlin University Alliance explicitly supports career-promoting measures for young researchers. In order to promote the careers of young scientists, it is therefore expected that at least one young researcher at the beginning of his or her career, i.e. with a doctorate or recent habilitation, will participate in the applying consortium. These may also be junior professors or, if applicable, W2 professors at the beginning of their professorship.

Can doctoral positions be applied for as part of an Exploration Project?

PhD students can be employed within the framework of an exploration project, provided that the employment contract is secured for the entire course of the project. Furthermore, in this case, the doctoral candidate must provide evidence that he or she has secured funding beyond the three years of the project until the end of the applicable standard period of study (“Regelstudienzeit”).

The securing of funding by means of a letter of support must be discussed and prepared individually within the respective BUA institution and submitted with the application.

Can doctoral candidates apply for funding?

PhD students / doctoral candidates or Dr. des. cannot apply for funding.

Can third party scientists or institutions (outside of the Berlin University Alliance) act as co-applicants and apply for funding?

Third party institutions or scientists, i.e. researchers who are not members (defined by having an employment contract of a minimum of 50% FTE) of a Berlin University Alliance institution, can act as applicants, but are not eligible for funding.

If they want to act as co-applicants, external applicants must state their financial contribution in the application (e.g. by contribution through their own position).

In addition, it is possible to name further external cooperation partners. These do not have to state their financial contributions in advance. However, it is possible to place external orders within the framework of the allocation guidelines for budget funds of the respective Alliance institution. These are to be billed as full costs.

Can members of the BUA Steering Committees apply for an Exploration Project?

Yes. However, the respective Steering Committee member is then excluded from any further matters regarding the call such as the review process.
Please note: Members of the Steering Committees 1 and 2 are excluded from an application for an Exploration Project.

**How long is the funding period?**

Funding is provided for three years.

**Can the funding period be extended?**

No. Cost-neutral extension may only be applied for in the case of illness or absence due to family reasons (e.g. pregnancy, maternal and parental leave).

**What is the extent of funding? How much money may be applied for?**

In the funding line *Exploration Projects* within the *Grand Challenge Global Health*, a maximum of 450,000 € per year may be applied for, resulting in a total of 1.35 M€ per project.

**What is funded? Which costs may be accounted?**

Funding is provided for cross-partner consortia with material and personnel resources (incl. student assistants) in accordance with budgetary law, as well as investment funds (excluding construction costs).

**Is the budget provided as funding third-party funding (“Drittmittel”) or as university budgetary funds (“Haushaltsmittel”)?**

Funding is provided as university budgetary funds (“Haushaltsmittel”). As such, the state budgetary regulations and guidelines of the Alliance’s institutions apply. Additionally, this means 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”).

The funds are to be used economically.

**Is there an overhead cost funding?**

No, since the funding is provided as university budgetary funds.

**Are the funds tied to the budget year?**

Approved funds are generally tied to the budget year according to the funded project period. Carryover of funds to the following year must be requested from the Alliance administrative office (“Geschäftsstelle”) by September 1 of the current year and should not exceed 20 percent. Similarly, by September 1 of the year, funds that are not needed must be reported to the administrative office.

**How important is teaching as a part of the application?**

*Teaching & Learning* is an integral part of the application for the excellence strategy and thus also of the activities of the Berlin University Alliance. Links between the different objectives of the Alliance are explicitly desired. In this respect, initiatives on innovative teaching within the framework of the call for Grand Challenge Initiatives are not obligatory, but welcome.
For example, teaching opportunities within the Student Research Opportunities Program (StuROPx) would be a good option. With the X-Student Research Groups this program is supporting research teams made up of junior researchers and students. The aim is to involve students in current research projects of partner institutions and enable them to participate in top-level research at an early stage of their studies.

The Berlin University Alliance sponsors up to 32 X-Student Research Groups every year. Junior researchers can apply for funding twice a year as part of a “Call for Proposals”. For further information see: https://www.berlin-university-alliance.de/en/commitments/teaching-learning/sturop/research-groups/index.html

**Are academic staff exempt from their teaching obligation as part of the Exploration Projects?**

No. Since the budget is provided as university budgetary funds, teaching obligations must be met.

**Is there an option for follow-up funding?**

Within all applications, a long-term perspective within the Alliance or outside must be formulated. Within the Alliance, there will be the option of applying for an Einstein Research Unit.

**What is the role of gender and diversity in the composition of research groups, in research questions and in research design?**

It is expected that applicants will ensure gender and diversity balance in line with the Alliance’s objectives and, where necessary, that gender and diversity dimensions are considered in the research question, the research design, the governance of the project, and, if applicable, in the design of research studies, planned accessibility of content as well as governance bodies.

**Do applicants have to provide a Letter of Intent (LOI) prior to application?**

Yes, if you intend to submit a proposal, kindly inform the coordinator of this by May 25, 2021 by sending an e-mail to grand-challenges@berlin-university-alliance.de. Please 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’ to classify your research topic).

**How are applications submitted?**

Applications may only be submitted online via the BIH portal: https://portal.bihealth.de/portal

The deadline for submission is July 19, 2021 at 3 pm. More information on the submission criteria can be found on the call website.

**What are the necessary documents of an application?**

The necessary documents for an application are listed in the call text on the call website. For more details, please refer to the online portal which must be used for an application.

**Can I apply for funding although the topic of my application doesn’t exactly match the five Global Health facets listed in the call text?**
Yes, as the call focuses on the most important determinants of Global Health. These are exemplified through five highly relevant facets in the call text.

**What is the selection process?**

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.

**Does it matter which partner of the Berlin University Alliance the proposal is submitted through?**

No. It does not matter if an application is submitted through Freie Universität Berlin, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Technische Universität Berlin or Charité – Universitätsmedizin Berlin.

**Will reports be required over the funding period?**

Consortia have to submit a final report. In case a progress report is required, consortia will be notified in advance.

**Is there a minimum employment level to be eligible to apply?**

In order to allow significant contribution to a project, an employment contract of at least 50% FTE with a collaborative institution is required.

**Are the provided funds LOM eligible?**
Whether the performance-oriented allocation of funds ("Leistungsorientierte Mittelvergabe", LOM) is applicable in the case of acquisition of funds from the Berlin University Alliance is decided by each BUA institution itself. In principle, however, the funds are not to be regarded as third-party funding, but as university budgetary funds.

**Do I need to inform my corresponding deanery of my application?**

Yes. All applicants must inform their corresponding dean’s offices and administrative departments ("Stabsstelle"). Please use the ‘Anzeigebögen für Projekte der Berlin University Alliance’ provided on the call website.

**In the context of internationalization efforts, are collaborations within the framework of the Berlin-Oxford cooperation valued more highly?**

Cooperation with international partners is generally very welcome. However, there are no preferences regarding the selection of cooperation partners.

**I want to submit a joint proposal with researchers from the National University of Singapore, is this possible?**

Within their partnership, the National University of Singapore (NUS) and the consortium of Berlin universities comprising of Freie Universität Berlin, Technische Universität Berlin, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin as the coordinating institution in Berlin are seeking to strengthen their relationship and collaboration.

It is intended to jointly fund one Exploration Project together with the NUS. The call for the BUA-NUS Exploration Project will be issued in September 2021 on the Alliance website.

**I want to submit a joint proposal with researchers from the University of Melbourne, is this possible?**

Within their partnership, which was established in October 2018, the University of Melbourne and the members of the Berlin University Alliance – Freie Universität Berlin, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Technische Universität Berlin, and Charité – Universitätsmedizin – are seeking to strengthen their already existing links as well as to stimulate new research collaborations between the five institutions.

It is intended to jointly fund one Exploration Project together with the University of Melbourne. More information on this will be available on the Alliance website soon.

**What is the focus of the funding - high-risk research with new approaches or a long-term research network with the prospect of continuation?**

The Call for Exploration Projects within the Grand Challenge Initiative Global Health explicitly supports high-risk projects undertaking novel approaches. At the same time, the funded Exploration Project should be able to develop long-term research projects or funding structures. Therefore, it should be demonstrated in each case what potential the novel approach of the project has for a permanent anchoring in the research landscape in Berlin. The initial focus should be on the three years of project funding including options for follow-up funding.

**Which personnel cost rates should I apply within my application?**
Please refer to the rates of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG), which can be found at the following link: [www.dfg.de/formulare/60_12/](http://www.dfg.de/formulare/60_12/)

**How flexible is the use of funds? Are the budget items fungible within the budget categories (personnel, material, investment) and between the Alliance institutions?**

Approved funds are university budgetary funds and are tied to the budget year in accordance with the funded project duration. They are earmarked and are to be used exclusively for personnel, material and investment funds according to the provided financing plan within the submitted application. Personnel, material and investment funds are generally fungible; however, the balance between the types of expenditure should not exceed 20 percent. If a corresponding reallocation between the funds eligible for cover exceeds 20 percent, please contact the administrative office.