

## MERCUR project funding 2026 – Guidelines

### I. What is the objective of the program?

The objective of the program is to increase the number of sustainable research collaborations and networks among the universities of the University Alliance Ruhr (UA Ruhr). The funded projects should lead to applications for additional funding from research funding organizations such as the German Research Foundation (*seed funding*). The future funding formats will therefore finance the preparation of joint preliminary research as a key requirement for the successful acquisition of collaborative projects. The focus will be on

- the **development of innovative fields of research**,
- the **expansion of collaborations** and
- the **promotion of researchers at early career stages** (*early career researchers*).

### II. Which funding opportunities does the program offer?

With this program, MERCUR supports high-quality research projects that are carried out by academics from at least two universities of the UA Ruhr (Bochum, Dortmund and Duisburg-Essen). The research projects must be designed to prepare the ground for long-term collaboration between the partners involved. This is why the application must include a description of the research project as well as the intended long-term nature of the collaboration and the associated objectives. These objectives can include the establishment of sustainable structures for joint research activities, a joint research focus resp. network or the preparation of a third-party funded joint project. The projects can be both disciplinary and interdisciplinary.

Funding of up to 300,000 euros (total project amount) can be applied for per project. In addition to personnel funds, applications can be submitted for material and travel funds. Early career researchers (usually up to eight years after the doctorate) and newly appointed researchers (usually up to three years after the appointment) can apply for up to 100,000 euros per project for small-scale cooperation projects (line: "Project funding (ECR)"). Their objectives may include, for example, the establishment of a collaboration and joint publications or the application for a joint DFG grant for material resources. The maximum funding period for a project is two years, with the intended follow-up objective (sustainable collaboration structures, establishment of a joint research network, preparation of a third-party funding proposal, etc.) being implemented at the end of the funding period. The funding of clinical studies is excluded.

### III. Who is eligible to apply?

Doctoral researchers who are employed as professors, junior professors, habilitation candidates as well as junior research group leaders etc. at the universities of the UA Ruhr are eligible to apply. Early career



researchers are defined as academics whose doctorate was awarded no more than eight years ago (the decisive date is the year of the oral doctoral exam). This period can be extended for maternity and parental leave by two years per child to a maximum of 12 years. The program is open to all disciplines represented at the participating universities. The research project must be carried out by researchers from at least two universities of the University Alliance Ruhr. A maximum of one scientist from the Research Alliance may be involved per application. For scientists from the Research Alliance, funding is limited to a maximum of €20,000 per application (with the exception of ECRs and junior professors). Applicants cannot apply for funding for their own position. Applicants should hold a position at one of the three UA Ruhr universities for at least the duration of the project.

#### **IV. How is the application and selection procedure organized?**

As a rule, one application round per year is run for the project funding line. In order to meet the strategic objectives of MERCUR, the application procedure comprises two stages (draft proposals, full proposals). The deadlines for submission are announced on the [MERCUR website of the UA Ruhr](#). The entire application process – from the deadline for submitting the proposal to the funding decision by the Executive Board – takes approximately seven months.

After the formal entry criteria have been reviewed, the submitted proposals are evaluated by the UA Ruhr's Vice-Rectorates for Research with regard to their strategic relevance for the UA Ruhr. The pre-selection is based largely on whether the follow-up activities expected to result from the proposed project contribute to the establishment of long-term cooperation with real added value within the UA Ruhr and whether they are in an appropriate cost ratio to potential funding by MERCUR. Objectives can include the establishment of sustainable structures for joint research work, a joint research focus resp. network and the preparation of a third-party funded joint project. Applications involving all three universities will be given preference among submissions of equal suitability. However, it is generally not possible for a researcher to participate in several applications in one funding line that are submitted in the same application round. The same applies to double resp. chain funding of similar or closely related projects. In view of MERCUR's limited budget, it will also be assessed whether other public or private funding bodies might be eligible to support the proposed project. An overview of the pre-selection criteria can be found on the website. Based on the evaluation, MERCUR invites applicants whose projects have passed the evaluation to submit a full proposal. The Vice-Rector for Research prioritize the submitted full proposals on the basis of independent expert opinions. The final funding decision is made by the Executive Board of the UA Ruhr. Please note that if funding is approved, an administrative lead time of at least six weeks is required before a project can commence.

#### **Formal requirements**

##### **a) Draft proposals**

- The draft proposal includes the application form and the CVs of all applicants. Please use the forms available on the MERCUR website for both. Make sure to submit the documents by e-



mail to the Management Office of the University Alliance Ruhr ([mercur@uaruhr.de](mailto:mercur@uaruhr.de)).

## b) Full proposals

### Which information should be included in the proposal?

**1. A project description** of a maximum of 10 pages, describing your research project in detail and outlining the steps you intend to implement in order to make the collaboration sustainable over the requested duration.

The application language is German or English. The abstract must be submitted in German and English, the cost plan must always be enclosed in German.

The project description should detail the following points:

- Proposal title and contact details of all applicants. Please indicate who the contact person is for any queries.
- Classification of subject areas of the project (based on the DFG subject classification system, see <https://www.dfg.de/resource/blob/331950/85717c3edb9ea8bd453d5110849865d3/fachsys tematik-2024-2028-en-data.pdf>). Please indicate to which subject area your proposal is primarily assigned (state the five-digit DFG code). In the case of interdisciplinary proposals, you may also name more than one subject areas.
- Keywords: Please use two to five keywords to indicate the main focus of the proposed project.
- Application period (in months) and desired start date of funding.
- Short, easy to understand abstract of the project (max. 15 lines). The abstract must be submitted in German and English. If the application is approved, this abstract will be published on the MERCUR website.
- Status of research and your own preliminary research (incl. details of your publications directly related to the project).
- Objectives and project program (incl. timetable and milestones): Please describe the research program and the objective(s) of your project and provide a detailed description of the intended approach, including the research methods. For collaborative projects, please describe the division of work between the partners involved. If experiments are to be carried out on humans or on samples taken from humans, a statements by an ethics committee must be enclosed with the application.
- Strategic impact of the project: Please describe the strategic relevance of the project for the cooperation of the participating universities in the UA Ruhr, specifically the added value for the participating universities and the UA Ruhr, any proposed follow-up activities (if applicable, including scope, specific funding bodies and funding programs). If the MERCUR funding is to be used to prepare the ground for larger collaborative projects, please also name other partners who will be involved in the subsequent collaborative project, provided they have already given their personal consent and are willing to participate in the proposed initiative.

- Statement on the instruments used to ensure research data management. If possible, please provide specific information on which repositories, e-labs etc. are used. Information on cross-university RDM services can be found on the UA Ruhr homepage under [Research Data Management](#), information on support services offered by the partner universities can be found here for [RUB](#), [TU Dortmund University](#) and [UDE](#).
- Bibliography: Please list all of your own as well as third-party publications that you have cited in the explanatory statement in the bibliography.

In addition to outlining the research objective of your project, the project description should also answer the following questions:

- Which national/international relevance does your topic have in your field of research and how much national and international competition is there?
- Do you want to take steps towards (further) internationalization?
- Are ECRs included or funded?
- Is there a potential to transfer the topic into society, politics or business? How is this knowledge transfer implemented?

**2. As first attachment**, please enclose a single PDF document with the CVs of all applicants. Please use the form on the MERCUR website.

**3. The second attachment** is a financial and cost plan outlining the costs for the planned project, breaking them down by cost type (personnel, material expenses) and providing a rationale. The total amount of funding that each university must provide for the project and the amount of funding per year must be stated.

Proposals must be submitted online. Please send your proposal together with the attachments listed above by e-mail to the Management Office of the UA Ruhr ([mercur@uaruhr.de](mailto:mercur@uaruhr.de)).

## V. What is eligible for funding?

As a general rule, MERCUR will cover all costs associated with your project and justified by your work plan and schedule. This includes:

- **Personnel funds** are generally approved as lump sums. The DFG's current personnel funding rates must be used as a basis. For doctoral students, funding should be calculated at 65 to 100 percent of the relevant average personnel rate, depending on the subject. Please refer to the information provided by the DFG review board responsible for your research area. Funds for student and research assistants can be requested as needed according to the standard local rates.
- **Material resources** include, but are not limited to, funds for scientific equipment and consumables, travel, events, publications and other items.

## **VI. Data protection**

Here, we provide information about the processing of your personal data as part of the review process and about your rights. As part of the review process and the activities associated with it, we only process your personal data that are relevant to the review. Specifically, this may include:

- Business and private contact details, including your name, title, address, e-mail address and phone number
- Personally identifiable information (PII) and non-PII (gender, date of birth, nationality, etc.)
- Data on previous applications to MERCUR – Information on content (e.g. classification of subject areas/topic of the project, summaries, evaluation of a proposal)
- Within the UA Ruhr, only employees and committee members who require such access to fulfill their roles or duties have access to your personal data. We only pass on your personal data to third parties if they are involved in the review process.

By submitting the project draft, you consent to the processing of your personal data, which you can revoke at any time with effect for the future. This does not affect the legality of the processing of your personal data until you withdraw your consent. Please contact us if you have any questions. We look forward to your proposals!

## **VII. Contact**

UA Ruhr Management Office

Dr. Hans Stallmann and Dr. Kathrin Kraushaar

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