

CZS Wildcard

Programme to encourage
unconventional ideas

Call for proposals for interdisciplinary
consortia

Published on: January 20th, 2026

Application deadline: April 20th, 2026

The foundation offers an English translation of the call for applications as a service.
In the event of ambiguities, solely the German version will apply.

Focus and objective

One 'Wild' Idea – Three Scientists – Maximum Freedom

With the CZS Wildcard funding programme, the Carl-Zeiss-Stiftung (CZS) enables teams of three to four scientists to freely bring forward unconventional research ideas at a very early stage.

Do you have an unconventional idea for a research project? If successful, does it have the potential to lead to entirely new methods, broad applications, or even a completely new field of research? Is the idea only feasible within an interdisciplinary team? Is there little to no prior work, resulting in a high risk of failure for your endeavour?

This sounds like CZS Wildcard.

The programme CZS Wildcard supports unconventional 'wild' ideas in STEM with a high potential for innovation. CZS Wildcard is addressed to an interdisciplinary consortium of three to five scientists with radically new, unusual, and therefore particularly bold ideas. The persuasiveness of the idea and the team will matter, not prior works or the reputation of the researchers. Maximum freedom is provided for this purpose.

Subject and scope of funding

The application must describe a research project in natural sciences, life sciences and/or engineering sciences (STEM fields) at the interface of two or more disciplines.

Funding can be requested for up to

EUR 750,000.

The funding period is two years. The earliest possible project start date is 1 January 2027 and the project must start by no later than 1 March 2027. A cost-neutral extension beyond the funding period is not possible.

The following costs are supported

- Personnel funds for scientific and technical personnel in the research group (e.g. postdocs, doctoral students, assistants).

The CZS expects the contractual working time of doctoral candidates to match the amount of work associated with the activity, which may mean full-time positions. Furthermore, the CZS expects that the contracts of scientific employees cover the entire period of the respective qualification phase regardless of the duration of the

project funding (s Guidelines 3.b). A maximum of 50% of the own positions of the members of the consortia can be funded from project funds.

- Material resources (this also includes travel funds, resources for scientific communication, networking activities, etc.)
- Investment funds

In addition to the requested project funding, the Carl Zeiss Stiftung will contribute an overhead lump sum amounting to 20 per cent of the project funding amount. The university will be responsible for deciding how to use the overhead lump sum, in consideration of the legal requirements. If funds are forwarded to partners on a pro rata basis, the overhead lump sum corresponding to the share must also be passed on. Please note the information to that end in the application guidelines.

Eligibility to apply

CZS Wildcard is aimed at scientists within STEM disciplines who have completed a PhD. The application must be submitted by an interdisciplinary consortium comprised of at least three scientists. The team must represent at least two STEM subjects according to the DFG (German Research Foundation) subject classification system¹.

Applicants may only be involved in one CZS Wildcard application. Scientists currently funded as part of the CZS Wildcard programme are not eligible to apply. Applicants whose application was rejected in a previous CZS Wildcard call for proposals may not submit an application with the same content.

Applications are submitted by the spokesperson of the consortium. His/her university will be the grant recipient of the project. The spokesperson must work at a state university or university of applied sciences of the states Baden-Württemberg, Thuringia, or Rhineland-Palatinate (CZS funding states).

The following universities and universities of applied sciences may provide the consortium's spokesperson and are thereby entitled to submit a maximum of **four applications** each. This does not limit other scientists at the respective university from participating in further CZS Wildcard consortia:

- **Universities in Baden-Württemberg:** Freiburg, Heidelberg, Hohenheim, Karlsruhe Institute of Technology, Konstanz, Mannheim, Stuttgart, Tübingen, Ulm

¹ In this context, interdisciplinarity is understood to refer to interaction between scientific subjects according to the DFG subject classification system. Interdisciplinarity is ensured, for example, when scientists from the fields of biochemistry and biophysics work together (cf. https://www.dfg.de/dfg_profil/gremien/fachkollegien/faecher/)

- **Universities of applied sciences in Baden-Württemberg:** Aalen, Albstadt-Sigmaringen, Biberach, Esslingen, Furtwangen, Heilbronn, Karlsruhe, HTWG Konstanz, Mannheim, Nürtingen-Geislingen, Offenburg, Pforzheim, Ravensburg-Weingarten, Reutlingen, Rottenburg, HdM Stuttgart, HfT Stuttgart, Ulm
- **Universities in Rhineland-Palatinate:** Kaiserslautern-Landau, Koblenz, Mainz, Trier
- **Universities of applied sciences in Rhineland-Palatinate:** Bingen, Kaiserslautern, Koblenz, Ludwigshafen, Mainz, Trier, Worms
- **Universities in Thuringia:** Erfurt, Ilmenau, Jena, Weimar
- **Universities of applied sciences in Thuringia:** Erfurt, Jena, Nordhausen, Schmalkalden

Up to 1/3 of the scientists in the consortium may be employed at

- a non-university research institution and/or
- a university or non-university research institution with headquarters outside the three abovementioned federal states or abroad and/or
- belong to a discipline outside the STEM subject spectrum.

In total, a maximum of 33% of the approved funding may go to members of the funded consortium who are employed at research institutions with headquarters outside of Baden-Württemberg, Thuringia or Rhineland-Palatinate (in Germany or abroad). All members of the consortium have to be employed at a public or a non-profit (“gemeinnützig”) research institution.

Selection procedure and criteria

The selection process consists of two stages.

- All applications which are submitted undergo a double-blind peer review process. This means that the reviews for the pre-selection are prepared without knowledge of the applicants' identity. Based on the expert opinions, a scientific selection committee selects the most promising applications.
- Mid-July 2026, the selected consortia get the invitation to present their project to the selection committee during a two-day selection event.
- The selection event will take place face-to-face on **17 and 18 September 2026** in Stuttgart. At least two members of the consortium must participate in the selection event.
- The presented applications will be evaluated by the selection committee. In addition, there will be a mutual evaluation of the participating consortia.
- Based on the evaluations, the CZS will make the final funding decision, which will be announced on site at the end of the selection event.

There is no entitlement to funding. Rejection decisions will not be justified. No information will be given about the selection committee's evaluations, the result of the mutual evaluation or the total score achieved.

While reviewing applications, priority will be given to the following:

- **The unconventionality and/or originality**
 - *To what extent is the project, the chosen starting point, or the theoretical/methodological approach original, unconventional, and/or radically new?*
 - *Does the idea contain a unique approach, a new hypothesis, a (still) non-standardized method, or a completely new combination of expertise?*
 - *Are there only a few ongoing projects in the field, and is there a lack of literature or data?*
 - *What are competing approaches and how does the new idea stand out from them?*
- **The potential of the research project**
 - *Does the idea have the potential to bring about a transformation of a scientific topic or pave the way for a new research area or a new method/technology?*
 - *How significant are the potentials of the project within the research landscape, in applications, and in society?*
- **The risk**
 - *What makes the project particularly risky?*
 - *Are the risks and challenges presented clearly and convincingly?*
 - *Does "failure" also lead to added value?*

- **The interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary approach of the application**
 - *How pronounced is the contribution of the various disciplines to the implementation of the common idea? Is this justifiable?*
 - *What contributions do the respective disciplines provide, and why is this specific combination crucial?*

Please consider the following, when writing the application: Although the reviewers cover the various disciplines of the STEM spectrum and work in an interdisciplinary manner, they may not necessarily have specific expertise in each of the projects.

Application

The deadline for application submissions is **20 April 2026**.
Applications received after this date will not be considered.

If you have any questions, please contact Dr Karla Hillerich at karla.hillerich@carl-zeiss-stiftung.de

CZS is hosting a Q&A session on Teams:
Thursday, March 5th 2026, 3:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m.

Registration for the session: [Registration Q&A CZS Wildcard 2026](#)

Application guidelines

General formal requirements

- The application has to be written in English.
- The application templates must be used for the application.
- Arial font, font size 10 and single line spacing must be used for the application. The specified length of each section (including figures) must not be exceeded; otherwise, the application may be rejected for formal reasons.
- References can be included as footnotes. The citations must include the respective DOI (Digital Object Identifier).

Documents to be submitted

The completed and signed application documents must be submitted by **20 April 2026** solely via the application portal of Carl-Zeiss-Stiftung (a registration is necessary):

<https://portal.carl-zeiss-stiftung.de/>

All files must be available without password protection or access restrictions for reading, copying and printing.

The application must include the following documents:

1. A PDF file (Template: *CZS Wildcard 2026_acronym_application text.docx*)- **will be forwarded in the peer review process → anonymously**
Title: *CZS Wildcard 2026_acronym_application text.docx*
 - a. Application text
 - b. Financing plan (**anonymised** please without names of scientists or institutions)
2. Financial plan as Excel file (template *CZS_Wildcard_acronym_financialplan.xlsx*) - **will not be forwarded in the peer review process**. Every cost position must be rounded to EUR 1,000.
Title: *CZS Wildcard 2025_acronym_financialplan.xlsx*
The following information must be included:
 - a. Funding requested:
Description of the funding requested, broken down into personnel, material and investment costs, including a brief justification.

Personnel costs must be calculated according to the regulations of the applying institution(s). Projected salary increases must be included for the second project year.

b. Forwarding of funding

The financing plan must indicate which institution will receive which funds.

c. Overhead lump sum

The overhead lump is automatically calculated for each project year from the sum of the funding applied for and is **added** to the total funding amount. In the view of the Carl-Zeiss-Stiftung, the following costs are included in the overhead lump sum and therefore cannot be requested as part of the project funding:

- Costs from a business perspective that are based on internal cost allocation, unless they are based on project-specific expenditures (such as data centres or other scientific services)
- Expenditures for construction and furnishing measures and rent
- Expenditures for general institutional equipment (such as IT infrastructure, office furniture, and protective clothing), for office material, postage and telecommunications fees, or internet access
- Expenditures for devices not directly connected with the project
- Expenditures for completing or repairing devices not directly connected with the project
- Operational and maintenance costs (such as electricity, gas, water, and coolants)
- Contributions to property insurance, expenditures for letters of protection, memberships
- Fees collected by authorities in connection with the implementation of the project
- VAT amounts, insofar as input tax can be deducted

3. PDF with the following attachments - **will not be forwarded in the peer review process**

Title: *CZS Wildcard 2026_Acronym_Appendix*

- a. Letter(s) of intent (LOI) from all participating scientific institutions (one page each), signed by the respective management of the institution (e.g. president, rector, vice-chancellor for research or another authorised signatory).

In the letter, they commit to provide the scientists with appropriate conditions for independent research work, to grant budgetary autonomy within the framework of legal provisions, and to organise the administrative handling of the project (administration of funding, etc.).

- b. if applicable: Statement on doctoral positions applied for:
The CZS expects the contractual working time of doctoral candidates to match the amount of work associated with the activity, which may mean full-time positions. Furthermore, it expects that the employment contracts of scientific employees are concluded for the entire period of the respective qualification phase regardless of the duration of the project funding. Respond to the following questions, please:
 - i. How does the project fit in with the individuals' qualifications? A project like CZS Wildcard carries an increased risk of failure, which could lead to a lower number of publications among the doctoral candidates. How will it be ensured that they can achieve sufficient results for their doctoral thesis?
 - ii. What is the duration of the contracts and contractual working time of the doctoral candidates who will work on the project?
- c. Short CVs of all applicant scientists, including up to three relevant publications (max. 1 page per CV).
- d. if applicable, additional attachments

These guidelines for application, the call and the templates are provided on the <https://portal.carl-zeiss-stiftung.de/>

Please note: Only the German version is legally binding.