

## DIZH Innovation Program 5th Rapid-Action-Call

### Promoting resilient and democratic communities

The innovation program of the Digitalisation Initiative of the Zurich Higher Education Institutions (DIZH) uses the Rapid-Action-Call format to support projects that respond to immediate social challenges with quickly realisable measures.

Democratic societies are inclusive by definition, but they are increasingly being shaken. There are many reasons for this, such as the dismantling of democratic institutions, the rise of populist narratives, geopolitical threats, demographic and ecological uncertainties, the erosion of rule-based social negotiation processes, the reversal of value discourses, growing mistrust of social institutions and decision-makers as well as of fact-based discourse in journalism and science. The effects of this are growing mistrust in institutions, information, and the economy, increasing isolation, and a lack of social identity and effective action on the part of each individual. This undermines collaborative and constructive negotiation processes, which are central to resilient democratic societies.

**The fields of action of the 5th Rapid-Action-Call** are specifically designed to strengthen the resilience and inclusion of democratic societies with the help of digital and innovative solutions.

**Field of action 1, "Agency"**, focuses on promoting inclusive societies, connecting people, and empowering them to actively participate in shaping their communities. The aim is to address broad sections of society – particularly older and young people, as well as those from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds – and to strengthen diversity and inclusion at all levels. The establishment and strengthening of 'open communities' is intended to promote community building, enabling mutual support, joint design, and the active use of public spaces. This can reduce loneliness, overcome alienation, and prevent the formation of "closed communities". At the same time, the emphasis is on empowering people, strengthening their ability to act and self-efficacy and promoting co-determination and co-creation.

**Field of action 2, "Participation"**, focuses on strengthening equal participation, transparency, and public engagement. The goal is to break down barriers at all levels, thereby enabling everyone to access social, cultural, and democratic processes. At the same time, transparency is to be promoted by improving access to reliable information, countering disinformation and fake news, and reducing hate speech. Another focus is on strengthening the public sphere as a space for encounters, shared experience, and learning. This includes promoting public spaces, public culture, and open discourse, as well as ensuring safety as the foundation for active and trusting participation.

**Field of action 3, "Framework conditions"**, focuses on strengthening infrastructure and promoting resource equity. The aim is to strengthen infrastructure for housing, living, and social interaction in different urban and rural areas across Switzerland, while taking into account the specific local conditions and logic. At the same time, the aim is to promote equitable distribution and fair access to social, financial, and cultural resources. This includes, in particular, improving access to information, services, and formal and informal educational opportunities with the aim of creating equal conditions for social participation and development.

## Conditions for the DIZH Rapid-Action-Call

**Application – content and structure:** An application comprises a maximum of three pages and must cover the following points (a Word template for submission is available on the DIZH website):

The application must explain the current relationship of the project to the topics described above. It is important to explicitly focus on one or more of the project's direct target groups (e.g. pupils, students, employees, cultural workers, housing seekers, stakeholders from politics and business, etc.) as well as the early and close involvement of one or more practice partners (e.g. NGOs, cantonal authorities, etc.). It is also useful to incorporate specific knowledge and skills from people with a clear connection to the topic (e.g. spatial planners, experts in sustainable urban development, associations, cultural institutions, etc.). A letter of intent from at least one practice partner is mandatory, clearly stating that the planned project creates a concrete benefit for the target group and that there are no redundancies to existing projects. All disciplines that are taught and researched at DIZH institutions are eligible to apply. Employees from the "Third Space" department of the DIZH universities related to the topic are also eligible to apply.

**Impact:** The Rapid-Action-Call projects funded as part of the DIZH innovation program should be able to be implemented quickly and contribute to digital resilience through a proven connection to digitalization. The impact of the project should primarily be achieved in the Canton of Zurich.

Applicants must explain accordingly:

- *which* issue is to be addressed, or which problem is to be solved,
- *what* impact is to be achieved, particularly in relation to the direct target group
- *how* and *where* a clear impact can be achieved by the end of the project at the latest
- *what* potential the proposed solutions have for similar challenges in the future.

**Budget and financing:** The DIZH funds applied for must be between CHF 15'000-75'000 (excl. own contribution/"matching funds"). The DIZH funds may be used for personnel and material costs or for the acquisition of equipment and facilities, provided they are below the threshold value.<sup>1</sup> They may also be used for applicants' salaries. DIZH funds cannot be used for expenses incurred by practice partners. The subcontracting of individual tasks to third parties using DIZH funds is possible if this is essential for the project<sup>2</sup>. Applicants must provide valid own contributions ("matching funds") in the same amount as the funds applied for. Advance contributions directly and synergistically related to the submitted project can also be recognised as own contributions (as in-kind contributions from DIZH universities; in-kind contributions from practice partners cannot be considered). Such preliminary work may be claimed up to 12 months before the project is submitted. The thematic relevance of the claimed advance contributions will be assessed as part of the evaluation process. If practice partners make their own direct financial contributions, letters of confirmation must be enclosed. As part of their own contributions, the partner universities may claim overhead costs amounting to 20 per cent of the total project costs (consisting of the special credit and their own contributions including overhead surcharge)<sup>3</sup>. In the budget calculation table (available on the DIZH website), applicants indicate the specific form of their own contribution. If prior work or existing third-party funding is claimed, the thematic link to the proposed project must be explained. Funds from other DIZH projects may not be used. Likewise, funds that have already been used as own contributions for approved DIZH projects may not be credited again. If applicants have any questions regarding personal contributions, use of funds or other budget aspects, they can contact the contact points at their universities and/or the DIZH Program Office at any time. The contact details can be found on the website.

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<sup>1</sup> Procurement of equipment, facilities and infrastructure that are indispensable for the project and have a useful life of at least one year. All DIZH universities (UZH, PHZH, ZHAW, ZHdK) have a threshold value of **50 kCHF per purchase**. Purchases that exceed these thresholds are categorised as "investments" and must be procured within the university. These cannot be financed with DIZH funds. However, purchases of equipment and systems below this threshold may be declared for the DIZH loan. For example: laboratory equipment, machines, instruments, tools, hardware (incl. operating software), printers, vehicles, furniture, software, licenses, patents, etc.

<sup>2</sup> A maximum of 20% of the total project sum may be used for subcontracting.

<sup>3</sup> The overhead surcharge applies at the level of the individual project, i.e. it is a fixed imputed surcharge per project. In total, a project incurs 25% overhead on the primary funds and 20% of the total project costs (incl. overhead), regardless of the financing split.

**Timetable:** Projects in this Rapid-Action-Call should not exceed a duration of 12 months. The application should show how the project objectives are to be achieved in terms of content, methodology and time and what expenditure is to be expected in the individual project phases.

### Evaluation criteria

When selecting projects for funding, the innovation program is guided by the following criteria and corresponding indicators, which are taken from the [Regulations DIZH Program Office DIZH 2020-2029](#) (available only in German). For the Rapid-Action-Call, criteria 1 and 5 are particularly important:

1. **Impact:** The project aims to implement research and/or technology-based findings in society and the market as quickly and pragmatically as possible and is accompanied by economic, social, political, cultural, artistic and/or ecological added value. The expected impact should be addressed by the practice partner in a Letter of Intent (LoI) (see also 5. Practical orientation). *Key indicators: feasibility, near-term horizon, scope, relevance for social stakeholders, differentiation from existing projects.*
2. **Scientific and technical quality:** The project is based on the latest findings and meets the high standards of the disciplines involved. *Key indicators: Relationship to the "state of the art", adequacy of the methodology.*
3. **Inventiveness:** The project has a pioneering character. *Key indicators: Novelty of the application, opportunities.*
4. **Cooperation and disciplinary dialogue:** The project contributes to the networking of the partner universities through its inter- or multidisciplinary character. *Key indicators: suitability of the interdisciplinary approach to the problem, synergy effects between universities and departments.*
5. **Practical orientation:** The practical orientation should be expressed in cooperation with at least one practical partner. *Key indicators: plausibility of the strategy for generating practical impact, existence of existing (or thematization of missing) stakeholder groups, target-oriented integration of practice partners, reference to a significant practical issue, letter(s) of intent from practice partner(s).*

Regarding the interpretation of the evaluation criteria, please refer to the document "[Understanding innovation and evaluation criteria](#)" (available only in German). The [database of funded projects](#) on the DIZH website is available for further empirical values.

**Eligible applicants:** All members of DIZH universities who are employed are eligible to apply. By submitting the application, applicants confirm that they are authorised to submit and implement project applications within the specified budget in accordance with the guidelines of their institution. A main applicant is named for each project, who is responsible for submitting the application and is considered the contact person. If the application is approved, this person usually takes over the coordination and is responsible for meeting (monitoring) the deadlines as well as the DIZH regulations and requirements (e.g. reporting) and represents the project. In addition, when submitting the application, the DIZH university is specified as the leading house. The main applicant and coordinator must be a member of the "Leading House". Financial and personnel responsibility lies with the individual universities. Students at DIZH universities can be team members but are not eligible to apply themselves. In addition, university members and practice partners must be financially and personally independent of each other<sup>4</sup>.

**Intellectual property (IP):** When submitting an application, it is ensured that possible third-party rights have been clarified and that the necessary rights of use are available. The rights are regulated in a case-specific agreement with the practice partners before the start of the project (a template can be downloaded on the website). The right of the partner universities involved in the project to use the results free of charge for research and teaching in all areas of application must be ensured. The existence

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<sup>4</sup> Independence is guaranteed if the natural persons involved on the part of DIZH-Hochschule:

- are not engaged with a practice partner at the same time;

- have no economic interests in the business activities of a practice partner and do not financially support a practice partner for other reasons.

Legal entities that work together as university members and practice partners are deemed to be independent of each other if neither party holds 20% or more of the participation rights of the other partner.

of an case-specific agreement on the use of the results is a prerequisite for the release of the awarded funding within the project opening process. In the event of approval, the IP issues will be regulated in accordance with the provisions of the [Regulations DIZH Program Office DIZH 2020-2029](#) (§7).

**Submission and duration:** The template must be used for submitting applications and the table for calculating the budget, both of which can be downloaded from the [DIZH Website](#). Further information on the submission modalities can be found at the same web address.

Submissions for this 5th Rapid-Action-Call of the DIZH Innovation Program will be processed according to the following procedure:

- The call for proposals and the submission portal will be available on **April 1<sup>st</sup> 2026**;
- Deadline for submissions: **July 1<sup>st</sup> 2026 at 12PM (noon)**;
- funding decisions will be made **by the end of October 2026**;
- projects shall start **immediately after signing the cooperation agreement**

## Background

### Digitalization Initiative of the Zurich Higher Education Institutions (DIZH)

Digitalization places great demands on the economic, technological and social innovative strength of the Canton of Zurich. Society is undergoing a fundamental transformation as a result of digitalization. This process offers great opportunities in all areas of society, but also requires new skills and poses new challenges for society, culture, business and science. It is a joint task of all these players to meet the opportunities and challenges and to generate innovations.

DIZH wants to strengthen the Canton of Zurich's competitiveness as a hub for research and development. The initiative aims to help industry and society take advantage of the opportunities offered by digitalization and use them to benefit the greater Zurich area.

The mission of Digitalization Initiative of the Zurich Higher Education Institutions (DIZH) is to promote cooperation on digitalization issues between higher education institutions in Zurich. The University of Zurich (UZH), Zurich University of Applied Sciences (ZHAW), Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK) and Zurich University of Teacher Education (PHZH) are part of the DIZH network, which aims to advance research, innovation and education on digitalization by using interdisciplinary approaches.

### DIZH Innovation Program

DIZH's innovation program is one of the initiative's core components. Our partner universities are running various types of innovative digitalization projects with the private and public sector. This is intended to bring research findings closer in line with practical real-world applications and also allows researchers to consider the needs and experiences of their partners in industry and government. Here the following characteristics of innovation play an important role: being open to taking risks, incorporating a variety of disciplines, creating value and working together.

Funding from the innovation program will be distributed in a transparent and competitive process. The focus is on funding projects that generate innovations that enable the new possibilities of digital transformation in the first place or expand these possibilities. To this end, different calls are launched each year.

For detailed information regarding the different call types and the funding conditions please refer to [dizh.ch/innovationprogram](https://dizh.ch/innovationprogram).