

## DIZH Innovation Program: 3<sup>rd</sup> Founder-Call

Through the Founder-Calls, the Innovation Program supports market, social or cultural entrepreneurial projects in the context of digital transformation. The Founder-Call contributes to the creation of spin-offs and start-ups in the for-profit and non-for-profit sectors by employees and students of the DIZH universities; importantly, the spin-off or start-up must not yet have been founded. Due to its explicit focus on early-stage financing of a start-up idea («Proof of Concept»), this type of call in the DIZH Innovation Program differs from other funding instruments for existing start-ups or spin-offs.

The basic idea of the Founder-Call is to provide low-threshold and early-stage start-up financing to advance the start-up process. This is to be achieved by financing the step from the pure start-up idea to the proof of feasibility of the project idea in the sense of a "proof of concept". The aim is to show that a conceptually developed project can also be implemented in practice. The successful implementation of this step should convince participants, partners and investors that pursuing the start-up idea is promising.

The "proof of concept" can refer to a new product, a new service, an artistic-creative production or a new business or operating model, as the basis for the spin-off or start-up to be founded. Collaboration between applicants from different DIZH universities is generally viewed positively.

Funding will be provided e.g. for the verification of feasibility assumptions (e.g. through market testing), the creation and testing of a prototype for a product or service, and the testing and exploration of the idea through an experimental pilot project. Support will be paid out to the universities where the applicants are employed after the project has been approved and not directly to the private founders. Applications seeking funding for an already founded spin-off or start-up (sole proprietorship, etc.) are not eligible for the Founder-Call.

Projects for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Founder-Call can apply for a maximum of CHF 75'000 in funds from the DIZH special loan and can run for a maximum of 12 months from the start of the project.

### Conditions for the DIZH Founder-Call

**Project application – content and structure:** An application comprises a maximum of three pages including a link to a pitch video of no more than three minutes, which delivers the core idea of the start-up idea to be tested, introduces the key players and shows the desired (entrepreneurial) goals and structures. The application must address the following points (a template for submission is available on the DIZH website):

**Key content points:** The application has to explain which range of services or production is the aim of the spin-off or start-up, which target groups are the focus (unique selling point in the market, market environment, groups of people, potential customers, etc.) and how added value is to be generated for the addressees. It also needs to show which entrepreneurial and social impact goals are pursued, what the motivation of the future founders is and how the start-up idea relates to the work of the applicants at one of the DIZH universities. If the submission is made in cooperation with third parties (organizations, companies, etc., hereinafter referred to as "practice partners"), the role and function of these practice partners must be explained.

**Feasibility and implementation planning:** The application text must outline both the activities and milestones of the proposed "proof of concept" project as well as the subsequent steps and measures

in the implementation planning of the start-up idea and structure, should the "proof of concept" funded by the Founder-Call turn out positive. In particular, the organizational implementation and financial sustainability must be demonstrated (in the sense of securing the operation and livelihood of the spin-off, start-up and not-for-profit organizations). This can be done, for example, in the form of a short business plan, roadmap or other implementation plan.

**Link with sponsoring and target organization:** In the application, applicants explain whether and to what extent they will use university infrastructures and support services for the implementation of the "proof of concept". Please note that, depending on the type of start-up idea, university-specific transfer processes must be adhered to (e.g. regarding intellectual property); the contact persons of the transfer offices at the DIZH universities of the applicants must be contacted according to the procedure below.

**Budget and financing:** DIZH funds of a maximum of CHF 75'000 can be applied for (calculated without own funds on the part of the universities). The DIZH funds may be used for personnel and material costs (including the salaries of the applicants), for the procurement of equipment and equipment (as long as they are below the threshold<sup>1</sup>) and, if this is essential for the project, for third parties (subcontracting<sup>2</sup>). Expenses of any practice partners may not be financed by DIZH funds. DIZH funds may also not be used as capital for founding processes and any associated fees.

As in other DIZH calls, applicants must also provide their own contribution to the Founder-Call in the same amount as the funds applied for ("matching funds"). Preliminary work with a direct and demonstrably synergistic connection to the submitted project can also be reported as personal contributions (as in-kind services from the DIZH universities); in-kind services from practice partners cannot be counted towards the counter-financing. Such advance payments may be claimed up to 12 months before project submission. If advance payments or existing third-party funds are claimed, the thematic reference to the applied project must be explained. The thematic relevance is checked as part of the evaluation process. If practice partners provide their own direct financing services, confirmation letters signed by the authorized bodies must be enclosed. As part of their own contributions, the partner universities may offset overhead costs against the total project costs (consisting of the special loan and the own contributions including the overhead surcharge) in the amount of 20 percent<sup>3</sup>. In the table for budget calculation (available on the DIZH website), applicants show the specific form in which the personal contribution is made.

Funds from other DIZH calls may not be used as a personal contribution, and funds that have already been used as counter-financing for approved DIZH projects may not be credited again. If you have any questions about own contributions, use of funds or other budget aspects, applicants can contact the contact points at their universities and the DIZH Program Office at any time. The contact details can be found on the website.

<sup>1</sup> Procurement of equipment, facilities, studios and infrastructures that are indispensable for the project and have a benefit of at least one year. A threshold of kCHF 50 per purchase applies to all DIZH universities (UZH, PHZH, ZHAW, ZHdK). Purchases that exceed this threshold are classified as an "investment" and must be procured internally at the university. These cannot be financed with DIZH funds. On the other hand, purchases of equipment and systems may be declared below this threshold for the DIZH loan. *Examples: laboratory equipment, machines, instruments, tools, hardware (including 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, 25% of the primary funds and 20% of the total project costs (including overhead) are incurred in a project, regardless of the financing split.

**Timeline and milestones:** The "proof of concept" projects in this call must not exceed a period of one year. The application must briefly outline the start and end of the "proof of concept" work, as well as the main intermediate steps.

Applicants who have successfully completed the first review stage with a pitch video will be invited to the second review stage on June 17, 2027, in the form of a non-public event with pitch presentations.

**Evaluation criteria** The Innovation Program is based on the following criteria and associated indicators from the "Reglement für das Innovationsprogramm DIZH 2020-2029" when selecting the Founder-Call projects to be funded:

1. Impact: The innovation is based on research and/or technology-based findings, can be implemented sustainably in society or the economy and goes hand in hand with social, artistic, cultural, ecological, economic and/or political value creation. *Indicators: feasibility, reach, sustainability, scalability and transferability, differentiation from the existing, topicality and time-critical nature of the question, immediacy of the impact.*
2. Scientific and professional quality: The project is based on the latest findings and meets the high standards of the disciplines involved. *Indicators: relationship to the "state of the art", adequacy of the methodology, stringency of the argumentation.*
3. Inventiveness and willingness to take risks: The project and the innovation it aims to achieve have a forward-looking character. Original approaches are being pursued that clearly stand out from existing solutions and procedures. *Indicators: novelty of application, opportunities, risks.*
4. Cooperation and disciplinary dialogue: Through its inter- and multidisciplinary character, the project contributes to the networking and realization of synergies between the partner universities. The project team represents the different disciplinary perspectives that are necessary for a differentiated approach to the project. *Indicators: Fit of the interdisciplinary approach to the problem, synergy effects between universities and departments.*
5. Entrepreneurial mindset: The project should show a path towards the future "proof of concept" exploitation. Individuals should be identified and involved who ensure project continuation. A possible business case is presented; this can take the form of a brief presentation of a roadmap or other implementation plan, for example. *Indicators: possible business case, roadmap.*

With regard to the interpretation of the evaluation criteria, reference is made to the Paper «Understanding of innovation and evaluation criteria». As an additional empirical resource, the database of funded projects is available on the DIZH website.

**Eligible applicants:** All university employees as well as students from all DIZH universities whose employment extends over the duration of the project are eligible to apply for the Founder-Call. If such employment does not exist (especially in the case of students or external doctoral students), applicants must provide proof of a commitment to employment for the duration of the proposed project at an organizational unit of a DIZH university. For each submission, a person with primary responsibility is

named, who is the contact person. If practice partners are involved, they must be financially and personally independent of the university partners<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. The right of the partner universities involved in the project to use the results free of charge for research, development and teaching in all areas of application must be guaranteed. The existence of an agreement on the case-by-case regulation of the use of the results is a prerequisite for the release of the awarded funding within the framework of the project opening. 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). The contact persons of the transfer offices of the respective DIZH universities can be contacted for further information.

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

- are not engaged with a practice partner at the same time.
- have no economic interest 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 considered independent of each other if neither party holds 20% or more of the other partner's participation rights.

**Input process and duration:** The template must be used for the submission of applications and the table for the calculation of the budget, both of which can be downloaded under <https://www.dizh.uzh.ch/en/activities/innovationprogram/> (from September 2026). Further information on modalities can be found at the same web address.

The submission process for the Founder-Call 2026 of the DIZH Innovation Program is as follows:

1. Call for applications and submissions
  - a. Publication of the call for applications: **September 1, 2026**
  - b. Opening of the input portal: **September 2026**
  - c. Deadline for applicants for project submissions: **January 13, 2027, 12.00 noon**
  - d. Decision first review stage/ possible invitation to the second review stage: **early May 2027**
2. Contacting persons from the transfer offices of the universities (see below) and submission of confirmation of employment from the university by the applicants (if students) who are invited for the second review stage (pitch presentations): **May 2027**
3. Second review stage
  - a. Implementation of pitch presentations: **June 17, 2027**
  - b. Communication Funding decision: **July 2027**
4. Project start
  - a. Earliest start date of projects: **as soon as the signed agreement is available**
  - b. Latest start of projects: **November 1, 2027**

The following contact persons of the transfer offices apply at the universities:

- |         |                  |                                                                          |
|---------|------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| - UZH:  | Unitectra        | <a href="mailto:loch@unitectra.ch">loch@unitectra.ch</a>                 |
| - ZHAW: | Legal department | <a href="mailto:rechtsdienst@zhaw.ch">rechtsdienst@zhaw.ch</a>           |
| - ZHdK: | Legal department | <a href="mailto:info.rechtsdienst@zhdk.ch">info.rechtsdienst@zhdk.ch</a> |
| - PHZH: | R&D Office       | <a href="mailto:marcel.behn@phzh.ch">marcel.behn@phzh.ch</a>             |

## 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).