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MISSION KI

AI Founder Fellowship Call for Proposals

**c /o acatech
Deutsche Akademie der
Technikwissenschaften**

Geschäftsstelle:
Karolinenplatz 4,
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Gefördert durch:



Bundesministerium
für Digitales
und Verkehr

aufgrund eines Beschlusses
des Deutschen Bundestages

MISSION
KI Nationale Initiative für
Künstliche Intelligenz
und Datenökonomie

— 1. Background

MISSION KI, a joint project between acatech – National Academy of Science and Engineering and the Federal Ministry for Digital and Transport (BMDV) – invites PhD-candidates to apply for the new pilot scheme **“AI Founder Fellowship”**. MISSION KI is a flagship project of the federal government’s digital strategy and is intended to strengthen the digital competitiveness of the German economy.

While Germany ranks among the top positions in fundamental research in the field of artificial intelligence (AI) internationally, translating this excellent research into practical applications has remained a challenge. In particular, Germany lags behind other nations in launching new ventures from science.

Against this backdrop, MISSION KI is launching the **AI Founder Fellowship**, which addresses these challenges with comprehensive support services. The AI Founder Fellowship aims to accelerate entrepreneurial activity among doctoral candidates in the field of AI at German universities as well as to provide talented early career researchers an alternative, entrepreneurial career option beyond academia. The Program offers financial and operational support coupled with a comprehensive entrepreneurship curriculum. Ten positions are offered to excellent doctoral candidates who intend to explore the entrepreneurial potential of their research and turn their ideas into startup ventures. The AI Founder Fellowship is open to candidates from all research fields and disciplines.

The AI Founder Fellowship is launched as a pilot scheme. In order to draw conclusions for the further positioning within the German funding architecture, an evaluation will be conducted.

This document contains all information necessary for applying to the AI Founder Fellowship Program. Eligibility conditions are set out in §5.

For **more information** about the AI Founder Fellowship:

Webpage of the Fellowship Program <https://mission-ki.de/de/ai-founder-fellowship>

Program Director: Dr. Julian Kahl (+491754431590)

Program Coordinator: Dr. Riad Bourayou (+49160/7936821)

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2. Objectives of the Program

The AI Founder Fellowship Program aims at accelerating the transformation of **excellent scientific research** into startup ventures (i.e. Fellowship Projects) and to foster doctoral candidates’ entrepreneurial skills alongside their research.

The AI Founder Fellowship

- grants **financial support** to a maximum of 10 selected beneficiaries (“Fellows”) in the form of part-time positions, to allow Fellows to systematically build, test and validate the economic potential of their AI-based startup idea.
- offers **operative support** by Venture Developers, a Sciencepreneur and Mentors to aid the further development of Fellowship Projects.
- facilitates connections to the Innovation and Quality Center Kaiserslautern and provides support for accessing **compute, data and further IT-services**.
- offers a **curriculum, bootcamps, monthly status meetings** and **networking events**, which will support Fellows to launch their startup idea (i.e. Fellowship Project).

The AI Founder Fellowship consists of two phases:

- In the first phase (February 2025 to June 2025), activities will focus on the technological proof-of-concept and the establishment of a **business plan** culminating with a mid-term presentation of the Fellowship Project / startup project.
- The second phase (July 2025 to October 2025) is centred on the development of a minimum viable product, advancing the business model, preparations to launch the venture as well as an **investor pitch**.

3. AI Founder Fellowship: Scope and Contents

To help Fellows transfer their research results into practical applications and prepare for the later founding of a startup, the following provisions are granted:

- The program will run from 1 February 2025 to 31 October 2025.
- **Financial support** as an additional part-time employment contract with acatech at level **E13 TVöD up to 50%** will be awarded to successful candidates. Note that the academic affiliation and status of the Fellow within the university should be maintained, ensuring continuity in their academic pursuits while participating in the AI Founder Fellowship.
- Fellows will benefit from coaching opportunities provided by a renowned expert in the field of AI (i.e. **Sciencepreneur**) to guide the further development of the Fellowship Projects and the respective technology roadmaps.
- Fellows will receive **coaching** by an external mentor and a project manager from acatech for the duration of the fellowship.
- **Venture developers** will assist Fellows in the preparation of their business models, in particular relating to potential markets, product design and the creation of a business plan as well as in finding potential co-founders / team members.
- For establishing connections to the Innovation and Quality Center Kaiserslautern as well as to access **compute, data and further IT-services**, each Fellow will be granted benefits in kind with a value of up to 15.000 € (subject to approval through MISSION KI Project Management).
- Under the Program, Fellows will receive ample opportunities to **network** with other participants as well as members from science and industry,
- Fellows will be granted access to **office space** throughout the AI Founder Fellowship in Berlin.

- A core element of the Program is a curriculum offered in three **Bootcamps** of up to three consecutive days. Held in English, Bootcamps are designed to provide the Fellows with the required entrepreneurial, managerial and technical skills necessary for their startup project ("Fellowship Project").

Details on the Bootcamps

Bootcamps are mandatory 3-day events delivered by Program Managers and expert speakers designed to provide Fellows with the necessary know-how to implement their Fellowship Projects. The following three modules are planned (indicative):

- **Module 1 "Business Model Design"**: Offers an overview of the core components of business model design. The aim is to enable Fellows to formulate their initial ideas for commercialisation based on their research in a business model logic and to develop core hypotheses for further validation.
- **Module 2 "Market & Customer Discovery"**: The aim is to enable Fellows to define value propositions, empirically identify customer needs, and align the innovative offering with the conditions and needs of the market. Fellows will translate the validated market and customer insights into prototypes with specific feature sets. For validation, the prototypes will be tested with potential customers in the form of minimum viable products.
- **Module 3 "Launch & Fundraising"**: The last Bootcamp conveys knowledge on the process of setting up a business and on the various sources of financing, including their advantages and disadvantages allowing Fellows to develop their respective funding strategies. Fellows will also receive coaching on how to prepare professional investor pitches.

Each Bootcamp will be supplemented with AI-specific content, addressing topics such as regulatory compliance and unique capital requirements for AI ventures. Concluding each session, entrepreneur talks will facilitate knowledge exchange and networking opportunities between the Fellows and accomplished AI startup founders.

4. Timetable and Deadline

Timetable and deadlines are indicative. Up-to-date information will be provided on the Program website.

Call opening	01.11.2024
Deadline for submission	15.12.2024 (inclusive)
Evaluation: Information on results	15.01.2025
Fellowship start	01.02.2025
End of the Fellowship	31.10.2025

— 5. Criteria for Eligibility

The AI Founder Fellowship is open to all doctoral candidates at German universities. Prerequisites for the application are:

- cutting-edge research results in the field of AI, and
- an initial business idea based on the respective candidates' research with significant potential for innovation.

The applicants must:

- commit to preparing a business plan and an investor pitch as part of the AI Founder Fellowship,
- agree to attend all courses and activities throughout the curriculum.

Collaborative projects

Applications may be submitted by individuals or teams of up to 3 (three) Fellows collaborating on the same Fellowship Project. Having team members is not a prerequisite for participation in the AI Founder Fellowship and is not relevant for the assessment of the application. All candidates of a collaborative Fellowship Project must jointly meet the eligibility criteria set out above and must submit their applications individually (submitting identical descriptions of the technical project description is admissible).

6. Application documents

Proposals will be submitted electronically, and must be readable, accessible and printable. They must be complete (entirely in English), and contain all the requested information and supporting documents:

- Form A: Administrative Information
- Form B: Details of the Proposal
- Form C: Supervisor's Consent
- A CV (max. 2 pages)
- A cover letter
- A copy of recent degrees and certificates

Should more than one applicant (maximum of up to 3 applicants) team up on a collaborative Fellowship Project / startup project, each applicant must submit an individual application. In these cases, please submit the following:

- Collaborative applications are required to submit a brief description (max. 1 page) of the team and the role of its members in a separate document.

— 7. Evaluation and Award Procedure

Proposals will first be checked for formal requirements (see sections 4 to 6). Proposals found admissible and eligible will be evaluated by a jury composed of members of MISSION KI and experts nominated by MISSION KI.

Proposals will be ranked (within their respective topic) according to the following criteria:

1. **Research excellence:** The applicant must provide proof of their research excellence, and the quality of the researcher's professional achievements.
2. **Degree of innovation:** The applicant must provide proof that the project entails a sufficient degree of technological innovation compared to the market; this also entails factors like the technical feasibility and (if applicable) the purpose of the team set-up.
3. **Market potential:** The applicants must explain how the expected results of their project addresses a market need and provide information on the IP situation.

MISSION KI will treat your proposal confidentially, as well as any related information, data and documents received. Evaluation experts are also bound by an obligation of confidentiality. Your proposal will be archived under secure conditions at all times and will not be stored any longer than the duration of the MISSION KI initiative.

8. How to submit an Application

All applications must be submitted (exclusively electronically) before 15 December 2024, 23:59.

To ensure a smooth review process, please adhere to the following guidelines:

- Submit PDF files only
- Ensure the final email size stays below 20 MB
- Name the files using the following format: *LastName_DocumentName.pdf*
- For the email, use the subject line: "Application - [Your Name]"
- Send this application to the email address: AI Fellowship@acatech.de

We look forward to reviewing your application.