

Individual Funding

Night Science – Space for the creative mind

Profile Area: Exploration

Deadline: June 5, 2025 (2 pm CEST)

With the funding initiative *Night Science*, the foundation aims to establish creativity as an essential tool for disruptive scientific discoveries. The initiative creates space within everyday research to develop unconventional ideas, hypotheses and theories. By promoting tandems of two scientists and the associated intensive exchange between them, the initiative seeks to cultivate creative approaches, challenge unconscious assumptions and uncover potential cognitive biases. The funding is complemented by practical workshops that specifically teach creativity techniques and their application to scientific questions.



Research Area: Natural, Life and Technical Sciences



Funding Type: Promoting creativity for scientists in tandems + mandatory framework programme with three workshops



Target Group: Scientists who completed their PhD before June 1, 2021. Employment contract duration until at least March 31, 2028.



Up to 200.000 EUR



Funding duration: 1 year



The decision is made by a qualified lottery procedure. No funding for the positions of the applicants is possible.

1 Objectives

Flashes of inspiration often come to us in moments of calm, during casual conversations or at night, when our minds are free from daily tasks. In a scientific context, this creative and abstract process is referred to as *Night Science*. Intuition, leaps of thought and doubt are not only allowed in *Night Science*, but are of central importance. This creative process complements *Day Science*, which primarily focuses on the structured and experimental testing of hypotheses. Both approaches, *Night Science* and *Day Science* — conceptually coined by the biologist François Jacob — are essential for scientific progress and mutually reinforce each other: While creative *Night Science* often generates bold but sometimes unviable hypotheses, the systematic *Day Science* enables for their critical examination. At the same time, the incremental nature of *Day Science* can be blind to new ideas, making it reliant on the hypothesis generation in *Night Science*.

With its funding initiative *Night Science*, the Volkswagen Foundation specifically promotes the creative phase of scientific ideas before they are fully developed. The goal is to provide researchers with the freedom to focus more on creativity in order to strengthen disruptive research approaches. Thereby, the regular interdisciplinary exchange between two researchers, so called 'science buddies', is at the centre of the initiative. Furthermore, the programme also seeks to promote a greater integration of creativity into the scientific system.

2 Scope of Funding

Funding is provided for a year of intensive collaboration between two *Science Buddies* who inspire, complement and challenge each other. It allows the buddies to step back from their regular research activities and seek funding for supportive actions. This allows them to devote more time to their creativity and the exchange of ideas within the tandem. **The funding period starts simultaneously for all grantees on April 1, 2026.**

2.1 Framework Programme

During the funding period, there will be three accompanying workshops, which are **mandatory for both tandem partners**. The workshops are designed to equip participants with a creative and proactive mindset. They offer space to develop individual creative strategies while providing a structured framework for inspiration and reflection on the topic.

The workshops will take place on the following dates:

13.-16.04.2026 | 05.-08.10.2026 | 12.-15.04.2027

Travel and accommodation costs for attending the workshops will be covered by the Volkswagen Foundation and do not need to be included in the expenditure plan.

2.2 Tandem of *Science Buddies*

- **Target Group:** Scientists in the **natural, life, and technical sciences** who work in the field of **basic research** and are currently unable to fully realise their creative potential but wish to develop and implement innovative ideas. We are looking for people who are open to unconventional approaches and interdisciplinary exchange. Ideal candidates demonstrate high scientific expertise, curiosity, problem awareness, and the ability to think critically, tolerate uncertainty, and persistently explore new paths.
- **Eligibility:** Scientists who completed their **doctorate before June 1, 2021** are eligible to apply. The date of the defense or viva voce examination is decisive.

The Volkswagen Foundation expects the funding year to have a lasting impact and expects that grant recipients will integrate their insights and new ideas into future research. Therefore, applicants must be employed at a university or research institution both during the funding year and for at least one year after the end of the funding period (**employment contract until at least March 31, 2028**).

- **Career Levels:** The two *Science Buddies* should hold comparable positions within the academic system to ensure an exchange on equal footing, free from hierarchical dependencies. A balanced commitment from both tandem partners is expected throughout the funding year, which should also be reflected in the budget distribution.
- **Interdisciplinarity:** The subject area (according to DFG subject area structure) of the tandem partners must explicitly differ from each other. A collaboration between individuals from the same research institution is not permitted.
- **Internationality:** International partners can act as *Science Buddies*, whereby one partner must be employed at a German research institution.

2.3 Eligible Funds

The maximum funding per tandem is 200.000 EUR. Since funding needs can vary greatly, applicants are offered a flexible *toolbox* from which they can choose according to their requirements. Additional suggestions and activities that enhance creativity are explicitly welcome and can be proposed by applicants.

The toolbox contains the following for which funding can be requested:

- **Conferences:** Participation in scientific conferences in Germany and abroad.
- **'Glue Money':** This offer aims to bring people together. The *glue money* enables *science buddies* to easily organise activities that strengthen mutual trust and deepen interdisciplinary exchange – whether through joint dinners, inspiring walks or other informal encounters. Guests can also be invited to these gatherings.
- **Guest stays:** Visits to the tandem partner's research group or a third-party research group. These stays should provide insights into different research environments and methodologies, facilitating the learning of new techniques, concepts, or approaches. Guest stays can be structured as a single extended visit or as multiple shorter stays, but their total duration must not exceed four months.
- **Creative time out in tandem:** During the creative time out, which extends over a period of about one to six weeks, it is crucial to consciously distance oneself from the obligations of everyday life, both spatially and mentally.

- **Laboratory manager / assistant:** To relieve the burden of organising the laboratory, support from a laboratory manager or assistant can be requested.
- **Teaching substitution or reduction of working hours:** Grantees have the option to reduce their teaching load or apply for a research sabbatical. Universities or research institutions will be compensated for the temporary reduction in teaching duties or academic administration tasks.
- **Workshops/ training/ coaching:** Grantees can participate in workshops and training sessions designed to strengthen their creativity and and integrate it into their day-to-day research. They may also attend training programs that explore how *Night Science* principles can be incorporated into existing teaching concepts. These opportunities are in addition to the three mandatory workshops.

No funding for the applicants' positions is possible.

3 Application and Selection Procedure

In contrast to traditional selection processes, the focus is not on evaluating a specific project idea or research proposal. Instead, the emphasis is on the tandem partners and their personal characteristics, which go beyond purely professional achievements. This approach aims to identify applicants who have the willingness and curiosity to engage with the unconventional initiative.

3.1 Overview

- Consultation hour (online, German): 15.04.2025, 10:30 am CEST
- Consultation hour (online, English): 24.04.2025, 10:30 am CEST
- **Deadline: 05.06.2025, 2 pm CEST**
- Announcement of the decisions: expected October 2025
- **Start of funding: 01.04.2026**

3.2 Procedure

Tandems will be selected through a qualified lottery procedure. 'Qualified' means that potential candidates will be carefully screened in advance by an internal pre-selection process before ten tandems are selected by lot from this group. The relevant selection criteria are:

- Synergies within the team
- Expertise
- Willingness to experiment
- Openness to self-reflection

Please note that each partner may only submit one application. It will not be possible to resubmit the same tandem constellation with the same partners when the next call for applications is announced.

4 Information on the Application

4.1 Our Funding Platform

Applications have to be submitted via the Volkswagen Foundation's [funding platform](#). All templates (CV, proposal template, etc.) are available for download on the funding platform or on the website. Please only use the templates available for download when submitting your application.

It is important that all applicants (PI and co-PI) register early on in the process. The co-PI can only be invited to work on an application if she/he is registered. In case of an international participation, the German partner should be defined as the PI on the funding platform. Apart from this, PI and Co-PI are equal partners.

For further support please contact support@volkswagenstiftung.de.

4.2 Information on Enclosures

4.2.1 Proposal Template

Please use the proposal template available for download on the funding platform or the website for the programme announcement. Please adhere to the page word limit. Each *Science Buddy* must fill out a separate application template.

4.2.2 Team questions

Please use the template "Team questions" available for download on the funding platform or the website for the programme announcement. Please complete the template together and adhere to the page limit.

4.2.3 Expenditure Plan

Please use the Excel template available for download at the funding platform. It is not possible to upload and use other Excel sheets. For instructions on how to fill in the template, please refer to the respective help sheet.

Please note: Each co-PI has to submit an individual expenditure plan.

4.2.4 Curricula Vitae

Please submit the curricula vitae of all applicants in tabular, narrative form, using the template available for download at the funding platform or on the website for the respective programme announcement.

4.2.5 Equal Opportunity Funds

To support equal opportunities and diversity in the research system, the Volkswagen Foundation offers the possibility to apply for equal opportunity funds. These funds – granted in addition to the maximum funding sum – support measures that serve to compensate for disadvantages at an individual level and/or aim to strengthen diversity in the education and research system in general. The funds are calculated based on staffing tableau and project duration.

To apply, please use the template equal opportunity funds available for download at our funding platform or on the website for the respective programme announcement and indicate the correct lump sum in the expenditure plan at the corresponding position. For further information please refer to our [website](#). For cooperation projects, a joint application for equal opportunities funding must be submitted.

4.3 Further Information

4.3.1 Overheads

With the exception of Max Planck, Leibniz, Fraunhofer and Helmholtz institutes, public or non-profit scientific institutions in Germany can apply for up to 10% overheads in addition to the direct project costs. The same applies to comparable scientific institutions abroad. For more information on overheads, see 'Information on Lump Sum for Overheads', which is provided at our [download section](#).

4.3.2 General Information

The foundation cannot be held responsible for any obligations prior to the receipt of grant approval.

Applications that have been or are intended to be submitted in this or a similar form to another funding organization will not be processed by the foundation. Applications that do not meet the formal requirements will not be considered for review. The foundation can only award funds to scientific institutions.

5 Contact

Dr. Franziska Rönicke
Email: roenicke@volkswagenstiftung.de
Phone: +49 511 83 81 – 262

Dr. Victoria Abakumovski
Email: abakumovski@volkswagenstiftung.de
Phone: +49 511 83 81 – 285

For administrative/organisational issues and telephone appointments:
Birgit Niemann
Email: niemann@volkswagenstiftung.de
Phone: +49 511 83 81 - 341

VolkswagenStiftung
Kastanienallee 35
30519 HANNOVER, GERMANY

6 Further Information

- [Website VolkswagenStiftung](#)
- [Website Night Science programme](#)
- [FAQ and Service \(including download section\)](#)
- [Influence of Generative AI on Research and the Volkswagen Foundation's Funding Activities](#)
- [Recommendations for Sustainable Travel](#)