

The "Interuniversity BOF projects" programme - iBOF 2025

Note: In case of discrepancies between the English and Dutch iBOF call, the Dutch version will take precedence.

Interuniversity BOF projects (iBOF projects)

In implementation of Article 49/1 of the BOF decree, as approved by the Flemish Government on 3 May 2019, the Flemish universities are launching the third call for interuniversity BOF projects (iBOF projects) in 2023. An iBOF call will be launched every two years.

Concept

With iBOF funding excellent, pioneering research (frontier or blue-sky research) is supported that will be carried out in a consortium of at least 3 promoters from at least 2 Flemish universities. An iBOF project brings together top researchers who, through such an interuniversity project, will (further) promote Flanders at an international level by deepening or broadening scientific knowledge and building capacity in a sustainable partnership. The involvement of promising researchers with great potential is highly recommended. The applying consortium must submit a concerted research proposal with a duration of 4 years, in which each promoter provides essential expertise for the realization of the proposal. At the same time, the promoters must be complementary to each other and/or mutually reinforcing, and they need each other to be able to carry out the project in synergy. They may have worked together in the past, but this is not a requirement.

Proposals from all **domains** are possible, both mono- and interdisciplinary project proposals can be submitted. When awarding the iBOF projects, the distribution of projects across domains is taken into consideration.

Global budget and timing

For this third iBOF call, the BOF funds of 2024 and 2025 that were allocated to this call are merged. Therefore the overall budget will be at least € 22 million (subject to further indexation in 2023 and 2024).

Timing for this third iBOF call:

- 1 June 2023: launch of the call – declaration of intent
- 26 October 2023 at 17h: deadline for submission of declaration of intent
- By 30 November 2023 (at the latest): conclusive formal eligibility and communication to researchers
- By 1 March 2024 (at the latest): announcement of admission to the second selection phase
- 31 May 2024 at 17h: deadline for submitting final applications
- June-August 2024: remote peer review
- 5 – 11 September 2024: rebuttal coordinator-spokespersons
- 11 September 2024 at 17h: deadline rebuttal
- 23– 27 September 2024: presentation by the applying consortia to the international evaluation panel and evaluation by the panel
- October 2024: interuniversity discussions and decision on financing
- November 2024: intra-university endorsement and decision on the awarding of the projects
- 1 January 2025: start of iBOF projects
- 31 December 2028: end of iBOF projects 2025

Who can apply for an iBOF project? The formal eligibility

- The application must be submitted by a consortium of at least 3 promoters from at least 2 Flemish universities. The involvement of promising researchers with a great potential is highly recommended.
- Per promoter, one or more co-promoters affiliated with the same university as the promoter whom they will join, can participate. Co-promoters share in the budget of the promoter they are affiliated with.
- One of the promoters acts as coordinator-spokesperson for the consortium. The coordinator-spokesperson is primarily responsible for the smooth collaboration of the consortium and is the single point of contact. The coordinator-spokesperson also submits the data management plan (DMP) and the final report on the project. In consultation with the promoters and co-promoters, the coordinator-spokesperson is responsible for the organisation of an event for a wider scientific and/or societal target group. The cost of this event is included in the requested project budget.
- All promoters and co-promoters comply with the Open Access policy of their own institution.
- A researcher can only be involved in 1 iBOF application.
- Promoters and co-promoters of an iBOF project that started on January 1, 2023, cannot participate in this iBOF call 2025. Promoters and co-promoters of an iBOF project that started on January 1, 2021 who have acquired an iBOF project in the context of the iBOF call 2021, can participate in this iBOF call 2025. If they wish to resubmit, it is strongly recommended to include at least 1 additional promising researcher with great potential.
- At least one of the promoters is a top researcher with an excellent track record. Excellence emanates from the complete track record and can be achieved in different ways. Important elements are an international top level publication profile, high impact and a strong project portfolio. To be formally eligible, per consortium one or more of the promoters have competitively acquired high-quality grants (such as ERC, Methusalem or Odysseus) and/or competitively acquired external funding of a high level and comparable magnitude for fundamental and/or strategic basic research (such as FWO-SBO and/or FWO-EOS) and/or play a leading role in European and/or comparable international collaborative projects.

The following applies to each of the **promoters**:

At least until 31 December 2028 (for the entire duration of the project), promoters must:

- have either at least a 50% ZAP appointment at the Flemish university from which they apply for funding;
- or have an appointment as research director of the Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO),
- or combine an appointment of at least 10% ZAP at a Flemish university (up to a total of at least 70% of a full-time equivalent) with a research mandate from FWO or with another research appointment at:
 - a Flemish academic hospital or;
 - a Flemish hospital with an academic character or;
 - a Flemish research centre (art. 2, 20° Decree concerning the organisation and financing of the science and innovation policy of 30 April 2009) or;
 - a recognized federal research institution or;
 - a Strategic Research Centre (SOC) or;
 - an academic education from a Flemish School of Arts or;
 - a foreign campus of the Flemish university where the researcher holds at least a 10% ZAP appointment.
- or combine an appointment of at least 5% ZAP at a Flemish university with an appointment as clinical head or assistant clinical head or equivalent function at a Flemish academic hospital or Flemish hospital with an academic character.

Exceptions:

- ZAP members who **retire** between 1 January 2025 and 31 December 2028 can act as promoters provided that there is a co-promoter who meets the formal conditions to be a promoter and has the appropriate substantive expertise (to be demonstrated in the project application) in order to take over the role of promoter and the remaining budget at the time of the retirement. From that moment on, the emeritus can assume the role of co-promoter without budget if the conditions for this are met at the institution of the emeritus.
- If the coordinator-spokesperson retires, the **role of spokesperson** is automatically transferred to the co-promoter, who takes over the role of promoter when the coordinator-spokesperson retires (must be indicated in the project application).

The following applies to each of the possible **co-promoters**:

Together with the promoter, the co-promoter makes a substantive contribution to the realisation of the research project.

A co-promoter does not have an own budget within the project and shares in the budget of the promoter with which the co-promoter is affiliated.

Co-promoters have a paid appointment at a Flemish university of at least 10% ZAP (at least 5% in the case of a combination with an appointment as a clinical head, assistant clinical head or an equivalent position in a Flemish Academic Hospital or Flemish hospital with an academic character) and will retire on 1 January 2026 at the earliest.

A co-promoter who will have to replace a promoter who is retiring, must meet the formal requirements to be a 'promoter' at the time of the application.

Promoters and co-promoters who acquire an iBOF project in the context of the iBOF call 2025, will not be able to participate in the next iBOF call 2027. There are no incompatibilities with other current BOF and/or IOF projects.

The duration and scope of an iBOF project - financial provisions

Duration: An iBOF project lasts 4 years.

Amount: The total amount that can be requested per promoter varies between 450 000 and 900 000 euros with a maximum of 3 375 000 euros per consortium. The requested budget is realistic and in accordance with the intended work packages.

Eligible costs: personnel costs, operational costs and equipment required for the approved iBOF project. No overhead is required.

Remaining funds at the end of the project can be used up to a maximum of 2 years, after that the funds are returned to the Special Research Fund (BOF).

Procedure and submission data

The call will be launched on 1 June 2023.

The selection procedure consists of 2 phases:

1. Interuniversity preselection of the declarations of intent (deadline 26 October 2023).

Deadline Thursday 26 October 2023 at 17h: the coordinator-spokesperson submits the application in English to his/her university. The administrative offices of the Flemish universities are organised in such a way that all submitted declarations of intent are shared and accessible to everyone. The declarations of intent are administratively reviewed by the various Research Coordination Offices on points of formal eligibility.

Information/documents to be submitted (please use the mandatory template for the declaration of intent linked to this call):

- the composition of the consortium;
- a description of the expertise and complementary and/or mutually reinforcing contributions (or potential for convergence) of the promoters and any co-promoters in the project;
- the details of competitively acquired excellence funding by at least one (co-)promoter;
- the English and Dutch title of the intended project;
- at least 3 key words;
- a clear budget breakdown per promoter;
- a brief project description of max. 4 pages, and an explanation of the relevance of the project which also shows how the proposal meets the concept of the iBOF call (max. 1 page);
- an English and Dutch non-confidential summary of the project (max. 10 lines each);
- a brief bio-sketch of each promoter and co-promoter with an indication of the five most important achievements of each of them in the last 10 years and a link to the complete publication list as included in the university repository.

Declarations of intent are binding with regard to the composition of the consortium (after the intention phase, promoters or co-promoters can no longer be added on the initiative of the applicants) and the budget breakdown per promoter.

By 30 November 2023 at the latest, all promoters will receive a message from the university of the coordinator-spokesperson about the formal eligibility of the application.

The Research Council of each university is called in for an intra-university preselection and a motivated ranking of all applications in which the university participates. The Research Councils provide advice classifying the projects according to 1st priority, 2nd priority or not to be elaborated into a full proposal. Within each category the applications will be ranked.

Next, an inter-university consultation takes place to reach a final, motivated preselection, taking into account the budgetary possibilities of each university. Each university provides at least the share required by the BOF decree in this interuniversity BOF call. For each university, projects representing a budget that is well more than this share will be admitted to the next round, up to about twice the budgetary possibilities of each university. The communication to the coordinator-spokespersons about admittance to the second round will be no later than 1 March 2024.

2. Selection of full proposals by an international panel (deadline 31 May 2024).

Deadline 31 May 2024 at 17h: the coordinator-spokesperson submits the full application (in English) to the own university. The administrative offices of the Flemish universities are organised in such a way that all final applications are shared and accessible to everyone.

Information / documents to be submitted:

- A bio-sketch of each promoter and co-promoter with an indication of the five most important achievements of each of them in the last 10 years and a link to the complete publication list as included in the university repository;
- A description of the specific expertise, including the five most relevant achievements, of each promoter and co-promoter that will be involved in this project, indicating the complementarity between the different promoters (where applicable with attention to possible exception for emeriti, see above) and the added value of the collaboration;
- A description of the necessary equipment (i.e. existing infrastructure or the need for smaller equipment requested within the application of the project);
- A detailed project description containing (on a maximum of 14 pages - including figures, charts and tables, excluding references):
 - o the state of the art in the research domain and references to literature;
 - o a clear hypothesis or research question, the research objective(s) and a brief explanation of the international ground-breaking character;
 - o the description of the methodology and the work packages;
 - o a motivated budget including a clear breakdown of the budget per promoter;
 - o a schematic representation of the work packages with a clear division of tasks and a description of the organisation of the collaboration;
 - o a description of the scientific added value of the project and the way in which it will give Flanders (even more) international visibility;
 - o a description of the intended impact of the results (of whichever nature);
- The completed ethics and privacy questionnaire.

The organisation of the external review of the projects and the evaluation by a high-level international, multidisciplinary, gender-balanced panel of experts will be outsourced. The members of the assessment panel are at least level R4 (Leading Researchers). In addition, excellent early career researchers with, for example, an ERC Starting Grant can also be part of the panel. The written remote reviewing of all applications will be received in the months of June to August 2024. Submitting a rebuttal is mandatory for all applicants. Both the applications and the assessment reports of the external reviewers, as well as the rebuttals are then submitted to the international panel of experts, which will conduct interviews with the applying consortia. The international panel provides a binding ranking of all applications and reports its findings in a well-reasoned recommendation.

The VLIR facilitates the communication between the universities and is go-between between them and the external partner that organises the evaluation.

In October-November 2024, inter-university consultations will take place at the VLIR (or digitally) in order to make a final selection. The universities are hereby bound by the binding ranking of the panel and by their own budgetary possibilities.

Final advice is endorsed by the academic government within each university so that the projects can start as of 1 January 2025.

Before projects can effectively start, all necessary approvals from the ethics and/or privacy committee(s) are submitted or planned. A data management plan (DMP) is expected within the first six months after the start of the project.

Selection criteria

The criteria for selecting the declarations of intent are:

- the formal eligibility criteria (by the Research Coordination Offices), see p. 2;
- the quality of the applying consortium (by the Research Councils):
 - o the international excellence of the applicants;
 - o the potential of promising promoters.
- the "fit" of the proposal with the concept of the iBOF call (by the Research Councils).

The criteria for selecting the full applications by the external experts and the international panel are:

1. The scientific project (50%):
 - o The exceptional scientific importance of the project and its excellence in pioneering/innovative aspects;
 - o The quality of the hypothesis/research questions and the focus of the objectives;
 - o The quality of the methodology and feasibility, but also the risk content.
2. The consortium (50%):
 - o The international excellence as it appears from the track record of the applicants; the C.V., expertise and achievements. These depend on discipline and seniority and can, in addition to being purely scientific, also be very varied in nature (from top publications, to exceptional international visibility to strong valorisation initiatives, striking outreach activities or other forms of strong impact). For promising applicants, it is important that the application file shows that they have the potential to achieve this international excellence;
 - o The availability of the expertise of the promoters and co-promoters and the value of the contribution of each of them;
 - o The degree of "concertedness" and the synergy between promoters and co-promoters.

Cooperation agreement

After awarding the projects, a cooperation agreement is concluded per project between all participating universities with a description of the cooperation modalities, including agreements on intellectual property. The signing of this cooperation agreement must be completed by 31 March 2025 at the latest.

Reporting

Before 30 June 2029, the coordinator-spokesperson submits a final report to the home university on behalf of the promoters. The Research Coordination Offices ensure that these reports are distributed to all Flemish universities. The Research Council of each university evaluates the projects in which the university participated with at least 1 promoter. The overall final evaluation shows the average of the evaluations per university.

The reports follow the following format:

- Part I: scientific progress / results of the project;
- Part II: description of the scientific and other impact and the way in which the research created an international reputation.

Contact per university

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