

M20 PhD Scholarship Program Call for Proposals 2025

When to apply?

This announcement includes information on the 2025 call for proposals for the M20 PhD program, the application procedure, and the topics selected by the Schools and the UEF. The online [applications portal](#) will be made available on Monday 3 February 2025. The deadline for applications is Monday 17 March 2025 at 12am.

Background

The M20 Program was launched in 2022 to fund PhD scholarships at the University of Groningen's four Schools for interdisciplinary research.

The program advances the university's interdisciplinary research program by funding new PhD positions each year over the coming decades. Funding for this program was provided exclusively by a private donor and is managed by the Ubbo Emmius Foundation. The 2025 round offers a total of eleven PhD scholarships to the four Schools:

- Wubbo Ockels School for Energy and Climate
- Jantina Tammes School for Digital Society, Technology, and Artificial Intelligence
- Aletta Jacobs School of Public Health
- Rudolph Agricola School for Sustainable Development

More information on the M20 program and the Schools' thematic areas can be found on [this page](#).

Who can apply?

Each application needs to address one of the Schools' challenges as outlined in the list of topics included in this announcement. Due to the terms and conditions of the donation that funds the M20 Program, projects on the study of religion are excluded.

Each application requires a minimum of two supervisors who are UG staff members from different faculties. At least one of the supervisors should possess ius promovendus. In addition, a ReMa-student can be a co-applicant for an approved PhD proposal from the respective program. In these situations, the ReMa-student must also be the candidate for the corresponding PhD position. Only students who have completed a Research Master at the University of Groningen are eligible to submit their application.

M20 PhD Scholarships

One M20 PhD scholarship consists of a lump sum of €290.000 to cover the full cost of one PhD position, including personnel and material expenses and a bench fee. The total budget for the 2025 round is €3.190.000 for eleven PhD Scholarship positions.

Application Procedure

Phase 1: Submission

Applications need to be submitted via <http://www.application-portal.uef.nl> which will be available from Monday 3 February 2025 until Monday 17 March 2025 11:59pm.

Phase 2: Eligibility Check

All proposals submitted before 18 March will be screened for eligibility on four criteria:

- The application must have two supervisors from two different faculties
- The proposal must address one of the topics selected by the Schools
- One of the supervisors must possess ius promovendus
- ReMa student has completed or is about to complete a ReMa at the University of Groningen (other universities are excluded)

Applicants will receive the outcome of the eligibility check via email no later than Friday 21 March. The outcome will be sent to the email address of the first contact person provided in the application.

Phase 3: Review Process and Nominations

The applications are reviewed by the M20 selection committee, chaired by professor Petra Rudolf, and including representatives from all four Schools. Each proposal is assessed by members of the selection committee based on the following criteria:

- Quality of the research proposal
- Originality of the research question
- Feasibility of the proposed project
- Relevance to the Schools' topics, objectives and long-term impact

The selection committee will create a longlist of final selected proposals for the 11 positions within the M20 program. All applicants will receive an update about their proposal via email no later than Thursday 1 May.

Phase 4: Pitch day

In May a Pitch Day will be organized in Groningen. If your application belongs to one of the final selected proposals you will receive an invitation from us to pitch your project to the UEF grantmaking committee. For the pitch each proposal will receive a timeslot after 1 May. More information about this day will become available in due time.

Phase 5:

The UEF grantmaking committee and the UEF Board will make a final decision and award 11 proposals with a grant. The selected applicants on the longlist will receive an email with the final outcome no later than 9 July.

Contact

This call for proposals is subject to the terms and conditions of the Ubbo Emmius Foundation available on uef.nl/grants

- Regulation for Grant Allocation
- General conditions for Grants

A document with answers to Frequently Asked

Information about the M20 PhD Program is available on uef.nl/grants. If you have questions after reading the FAQ document, please contact us via grants@uef.nl.

Annex: Selected topics for 2025

Overview

Aletta Jacobs School of Public Health

I: Topic: Policy for a Healthy Living Environment

II: Topic: Citizens' Perspectives on and for Health Systems

Wubbo Ockels School for Energy and Climate

I: Empowerment of Society within the Energy Transition

II: Climate Adaptation

Rudolf Agricola School for Sustainable Development

I: SL&R Revitalizing the Knowledge and Management of Sustainable Landscapes Together

II: D&G Knowledge and democratic politics in sustainable development

Jantina Tammes School for Digital Society, Technology, and Artificial Intelligence

I: Integrative and/or cognitive AI

II: Digital transition in view of legal frameworks

Full list of topics

Aletta Jacobs School of Public Health

I: Topic: Policy for a Healthy Living Environment

One of the core frameworks for Aletta's working model is the Health Capabilities Model. In line with this model, we believe in a Health in All Policies (HiAP) approach. The different social and physical contexts of people's living environment have a large influence on health. Often, however, these are not regulated with health in mind as a core value to protect and improve. We welcome research proposals that go into the influence of different aspects of the living environment (including perception and understanding associated with social, economic and cultural contexts) on health and focus on opportunities for designing policy for a healthy living environment for all. Also, the wider governance and policy implications may be considered for an application.

II: Topic: Citizens' Perspectives on and for Health Systems

The challenges of transforming healthcare to care for health are huge and complex, i.e., pose so called 'wicked problems'. Single and simplistic solutions may have superficial appeal, yet are likely to fail and result in anger and disillusion. Yet the present impasse prevails. Would well-informed, knowledgeable citizens still cling to populist pipe dreams, or would they come up with realistic perspectives and plans for a sustainable system for health? Literacy regarding (determinants of) health, healthcare, resources, regulations and health-economics, e.g. brought to citizen councils, might result in broad support and recognition of ensuing policy decisions. As a next level transdisciplinary approach, we are interested in practical solutions and impact of citizen representation in policy making.

Wubbo Ockels School for Energy and Climate

I: Empowerment of Society within the Energy Transition

The empowerment of society is put at the heart of the energy transition by the European Union. The energy transition requires considerable changes in human behavior and more generally how society interacts with the living environment. Society must thus be able to play an active role in the energy transition. This theme focuses on how the role of society in the energy transition can be empowered. Three main areas of research are considered of particular relevance within this theme. First, social participation in the energy transition, i.e. a person's involvement in activities providing interactions with others in community life and in important shared spaces, evolving according to available time and resources, and based on the societal context and what individuals want and is meaningful as regards the energy transition. Second, procedural participation, i.e. individual or collective involvement in decision-making processes concerning the energy transition. Third, financial participation broadly defined, i.e. the person's individual or collective ability to directly or indirectly benefit from the energy transition in financial terms. This research field offers a fruitful ground for interdisciplinary research involving, but not limited to, communication, politics, philosophy, theology, engineering, law, economics, psychology, sociology, business and economics and spatial sciences. Ph.D. projects should be focusing on a combination of technical challenges, political/ethical/legal/governance challenges, business/economic challenges, societal

acceptability challenges, communication challenges and spatial configuration of hydrogen facilities (at least two challenges).

II: Climate Adaptation

The climate is changing and this affects both humans and nature. Climate adaptation is simultaneously a technological, ecological, social-cultural and political challenge. This requires the adoption of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches. In addition to engineering and ecological perspectives, perspectives from the social sciences need to be explicitly integrated with existing and future material and technological solutions, to allow adaptation solutions to be inclusive, bankable, socially just, acceptable and attractive – enhancing local and regional spatial qualities. This included focusing on social innovation, addressing adaptation goals while also including societal stakeholders in processes of co-creation, and study issues ranging from behavioral change, governance, regulations, spatial and institutional design, blockchain technology and economic business cases. These interdisciplinary aspects can represent the specific added value of Groningen research in the international climate adaptation debate. Ph.D. projects should be focusing on a combination of ecological challenges, technical challenges, legal/governance challenges, business/economic challenges, societal acceptability challenges and spatial configuration of climate adaptation (at least two challenges).

Rudolf Agricola School for Sustainable Development

I: SL&R Revitalizing the Knowledge and Management of Sustainable Landscapes Together
Landscapes are at the heart of many of today's most pressing societal challenges —whether related to climate change, biodiversity loss, or the management of nitrogen emissions. In agricultural regions, these challenges are further compounded by issues such as nutrient depletion, soil erosion or subsidence, and changing biodiversity. To tackle these profound sustainability challenges involves working with serious value conflicts and differences in interests. Steering for sustainability at the landscape or regional level requires better field-crossing scientific knowledge processes as well as innovative societal interventions.

The central question guiding this call is: How can the diverse and conflicting demands and expectations of various stakeholders regarding sustainable landscapes lead to practical and accepted solutions for all parties involved – also those negatively affected? Addressing this question requires integration of ecological, economic, and social knowledge and the communication of that knowledge. It requires open co-designing decision-making that fosters collaboration and productive negotiation among local communities, policymakers, businesses, media and other stakeholders.

We seek proposals that apply innovative transdisciplinary, collaborative approaches to tackle sustainability challenges, integrating scientific knowledge with practical insights from stakeholders across sectors. Projects should engage with landscapes as dynamic spaces where societal and environmental processes intersect, offering transformative solutions to key challenges. These may involve topics such as climate adaptation, landscape history, regenerative farming, cultural identity, sustainable production, nutrient cycles, or the management of land and water systems. There should be an aim to deliver tangible outputs, such as spatial decision-support tools or co-developed landscape management approaches.

These outputs should be relevant to landscape stakeholders and at least one key economic sector, and they should work also on the longer term beyond the PhD project's horizon.

Proposals must come from one (or a combination of multiple) existing interdisciplinary research groups within Agricola. The supervision team should span at least two different faculties. Moreover, a transdisciplinary approach is important. Projects should at a minimum have clear societal relevance and closely involve one or more societal stakeholders. Such involvement may include meaningful and demonstrable forms of collaboration or even cutting-edge ways of co-creation.

II: D&G Knowledge and democratic politics in sustainable development

The role of knowledge in the democratic management of sustainable development is more salient than ever. In complex societies, public policy-making, implementation, and evaluation increasingly depend on experts to facilitate effective problem-solving. However, policies driven by expertise are often criticized for fostering technocratic excesses that unduly depoliticize issues and distance decision-making from citizens' control. This concern is particularly pronounced in the area of sustainable development, which entails three interconnected challenges:

- 1) The dependence on rapidly evolving fields of knowledge, in which the establishment of scientific consensus is more precarious, and therefore exposed to greater political contestation.
- 2) The tension between the long-term thinking implied in and needed by sustainability science, and the short-term horizons of electoral politics.
- 3) The crucial role of international cooperation in the pursuit of sustainability goals, but the absence of adequate institutional structures for transnational democratic oversight.

Technological advancements, such as the rise of social media and artificial intelligence, further intensify the tensions between expertise and democracy, by democratizing access to knowledge while simultaneously blurring the lines between accurate and misleading information.

Proposals under this theme must engage with SDG 16 "Peace, justice, and strong institutions", in combination with one or more of the remaining SDGs. More precisely, projects should investigate, via a comparative approach, different ways of reconciling the competing demands of democratic legitimacy and expertise-based decision-making in one or more areas of sustainable development, with a view to making conclusions on alternative institutional solutions to these dilemmas, and on their consequences for the viability of democratic institutions at different levels.

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Jantina Tammes School for Digital Society, Technology, and Artificial Intelligence

I: Integrative and/or cognitive AI

An emerging line of work in AI research explores how approaches involving AI can be better integrated and/or related to human cognitive processes. For this topic, we invite researchers from all disciplines to examine how methods beyond the technical field can be integrated and how new insights can be obtained about cognitive processes with the help of existing or new AI models. We also welcome projects that examine new application domains for integrative and/or cognitive AI. Applications should identify innovative ideas of combining AI tools with the knowledge that is specific in the application domains. We are also interested in better understanding human decisions and behaviors when applying AI and digital technologies.

II: Digital transition in view of legal frameworks

With the implementation of legal regulations in Europe, like GDPR and the AI Act, and other regulatory frameworks worldwide, a wide range of digital and AI technologies need to be examined or improved to match the values in the regulatory frameworks. For example the transparency (or its lack) of AI in public administration, health care sector, law enforcement, court room, border security etc. could have an effect on the rule of law and democratic values. There is also intense discussion about how those legal regulations need to be adapted in the future because of technological or societal needs. We encourage a transdisciplinary approach to examine the interaction between legal and regulatory frameworks and digital transitions that are taking place or can be expected in the future. We are interested in knowing how such frameworks can contribute to, or the change needed for, responsible AI use while allowing space for innovation. Research that explores the technical, social and economic consequences of recent and/or expected legal and regulatory frameworks is also highly relevant for this topic.