Fortissimo Plus, EuroHPC Project 101163317, https://www.ffplus-project.eu/

Call for Proposals for Innovation Studies for the Development of Generative AI Models

Identifier: FFplus_Call-2-Type-2

Call Title: Second call for innovation studies for the development of generative AI models

Project name and grant agreement number: Fortissimo Plus, 101163317

Project Acronym: FFplus

Submission Deadline: The call will be closed when either 250 proposals have been received, or on February 25th 2026, 17:00 Brussels local time, whichever point in time is earlier. Proposal submission will be possible commencing on February 3rd, 2026 at 9:00 Brussels time.

Expected duration of innovation studies: 10 months, with targeted commencement September 1st, 2026.

The indicative total funding budget for all sub-projects funded under this call is € 4M.

Funding and eligibility: A number of funding constraints and eligibility conditions apply, detailed in the full announcement text below. Applicants are requested to ensure that their proposals comply with all constraints and eligibility conditions as failure to do so can lead to the proposal being rejected after an administrative check and without the technical aspects of the proposal being evaluated.

Submission language: English

Internet address for full open call information and proposal submission
https://www.ffplus-project.eu/en/open-call/innovation-studies/

E-mail: ffplus-call2-t2@scapos.eu

FFplus Introduction

FFplus is funded by the EuroHPC Joint Undertaking (EuroHPC JU) action DIGITAL-EUROHPC-JU-2023-SME-01 "Supporting the competitiveness and innovation potential of SMEs". The central objective of the action is to empower SMEs with advanced computational capabilities based on HPC, enabling them to drive innovation, enhance competitiveness, and overcome challenges in the digitisation of R&D and business processes.

Consequently, the work carried out under FFPlus will lead to innovative business experiments and innovation studies that will showcase the benefits of adopting HPC for SMEs and startups throughput Europe.

In particular, the FFplus project will use open calls for proposals to select business experiments and innovation studies (also referred to as sub-projects) that will be funded through the mechanism of Financial Support for Third Parties (FSTP). Over the duration of the project, FFplus will provide over € 24 million to such sub-projects selected through a total of six open calls: three of which will target small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) using high-performance computing (HPC) to improve their business (business experiments), and three of which will target SMEs/Start-ups in the field of generative artificial intelligence (innovation studies).

FFplus_Call-2_Type-2 Objectives

In line with the general objective of supporting SMEs in their adoption of HPC technologies and services, this FFplus open call for the development of generative AI models addresses the needs of SMEs and Start-ups **proficient in generative AI and HPC for large-to extreme-scale computing resources**.[1] The strategic objective is to facilitate and strengthen the technological development of European SMEs in the area of generative AI. The participating SMEs and Start-ups will be supported in enhancing their innovation potential by leveraging new generative AI models, such as Large Language Models (LLMs), building on their existing expertise, application domain, business model and potential for expansion.

This announcement is the second call for proposals for "innovation studies" driven by the business needs of SMEs and Start-ups highly competent in generative AI, professional software development, and data processing. The innovation studies must use large-scale European HPC resources (e.g., pre-exascale and exascale supercomputers) to develop and customise generative AI models such as foundation and large language models.

This FFplus call is complementary to the open call for proposals for business experiments addressing the uptake of HPC by SMEs (Identifier FFplus_Call-2-Type-1). It should be noted that SMEs[2] may only participate in one of the two types of sub-projects, i.e. participation is mutually exclusive.

Expectations for the innovation studies and proposals

The proposed innovation studies are expected to:

[1] Failure to document that proficiency will be evaluated as a failure to be aligned with the FFplus objectives.
[2] With the role of main participant – defined under "funding and eligibility criteria"

1. Be fully aligned with the FFplus call objectives defined above.
2. Give grounds as to why generative AI serves as a solution to the business problem or business prospect, why the development of a new model is imperative[3] and why this could not be addressed sooner. Specifically, list the obstacles preventing the utilization of existing generative AI models to address the business problem, by e.g. few-shot prompting, licencing issues, etc.
3. Present a vision of success, i.e. how using large-scale HPC will lead to positive business impact. If applicable, define the value propositions and the process of value creation. The subsequent sub-section addressing HPC Computing Resources also provides an indicator for the expected scope of "large-scale HPC".
4. Define specific objectives that must be achieved to successfully address the business problem and the accompanying action plan described in terms of an ML lifecycle: data preparation, model development/engineering and model evaluation. However, model exploitation, deployment or operation are all out of scope of activities eligible to be funded by the FFplus project. Additionally:
    i. Provide a detailed description and demonstrate the availability of a suitable training data set;
    ii. Detail the characteristics of the models to be developed, including type, size, hyperparameters, and architecture, and outline their repercussions to training and exploitation.
    iii. Establish Performance Metrics and Reproducibility Plan: Clearly outline and justify the selection of performance metrics for model evaluation, scaling, and optimisation. Describe benchmarks to establish baselines and specify methods to ensure experiment reproducibility.
    iv. Identify potential risks considering EU guidelines for trustworthy AI, including unfairness, bias, hallucinations, and model drift during the exploitation phase, and present means to address and mitigate them.
5. Justify Resource Allocation: Conclusively demonstrate how the allocated resources (personnel, IT/computing, and any other resources) address and fill current gaps in the processes needed to implement the proposed action. This potentially includes computing costs; please see the section "HPC Computing Resources" below.
6. Describe the ML lifecycle: Clearly define the business problem at hand. Provide an overview of crucial dataset characteristics. Detail the models intended for development and deployment and outline their application in production.
7. Submit a Comprehensive Data Management Plan: Present a data management plan that covers policies for data access, usage, sharing, retention, and disposal; outlines methods for protecting sensitive or personal data; and incorporates FAIR principles and their implementation when applicable.
8. Support the FFplus project in the generation of success stories suitable for publication, including in multi-media form, discussing business benefits (e.g., additional income, new business models, decreasing cost), technical and business challenges, and societal and environmental impact, e.g. energy-to-solution improvement.

[3] Development of a new generative AI model may involve customizing a foundational model to suit specific needs.

9. Produce a pre-final results and potential impact report: It is a requirement of all innovation studies that they deliver an intermediate report on the results achieved (and those expected by the end of the study) and the potential impact of those results on the SME's business model and potentially by third parties using the results. This report is to be delivered by the end of the 7th month. It will be used to evaluate the eligibility to submit a proposal for extension/continuation of the innovation study to the subsequent (third) open call for proposals.

HPC Computing Resources

The FFplus project is not in a position to provide HPC computing resources itself, nor does it have any special allocation or preferred-priority access to the HPC systems of the EuroHPC JU. As explained in the subsequent section of this document, there is an expectation that FFplus sub-projects make use of the HPC resources provided under the EuroHPC JU access schemes, which services are provided free of charge. The use of nationally provisioned HPC resources is considered equivalent.

In general, the EuroHPC JU access schemes are organised as a number of different calls for proposals with differing submission dates and available resource volumes and lengths of access and including specific opportunities for industrial users. Proposers are referred to the EuroHPC JU website for regularly updated information about the various access calls, which are organised in the two areas "supercomputers access"[4] and "AI Factories access".

For the sub-projects to be submitted to this open call, it is expected that the AI Factories access scheme is the most appropriate choice and provides a range of options (such as timing of submissions, expected response times for access evaluation, compute volumes and periods of use):
https://eurohpc-ju.europa.eu/ai-factories/ai-factories-access-calls_en

Since the call expectation is for innovation studies to target the use of large-scale HPC resources, an indicator for this is that, other than for initial testing, the proposed study's requirements should clearly exceed the resource allocations foreseen in the "playground access" option of the AI Factories access scheme.

The HPC National Competence Centres may be able to aid proposers with the selection of appropriate resources and access schemes and the related application process.

When suitably justified, the use of 3rd party commercial HPC resources is permissible, but the corresponding costs need to be taken into account within the proposal budget. Similarly, the use of resources provided by an organisation, such as an HPC centre, included within the sub-project consortium as supporting participant (explained in the following section) is permissible when suitably justified. It should be noted that the provision and cost of charged HPC resources by a supporting partner must be based on actual costs and not commercial rates. These costs have to be included in the experiment's budget as "other direct cost" of the partner providing the HPC resources to the experiment consortium.

[4] https://eurohpc-ju.europa.eu/supercomputers/supercomputers-access-policy-and-faq_en

Funding, Eligibility Criteria and Obligations

The total indicative funding budget for Call 2 sub-projects performing innovation studies for the development of generative AI models is € 4 million.

FFplus will make use of the FSTP (Financial Support of Third Parties) funding method for the innovation study consortia selected through the open call. For all sub-projects funded under FSTP, an agreement will be concluded between the innovation study consortium and the FFplus Coordinator; provisions for avoidance of conflicts of interest between sub-projects will be anchored in that agreement. Before conclusion of the funding agreements, the SME will be required to document: a) their self-assessment of adherence to EU guidelines for trustworthy AI; b) their status as SME in line with European Commission definitions.

Third Parties will receive 100% funding of incurred, eligible direct costs necessary for the completion of theinnovation study activities; no indirect costs or overheads will be funded. The FFplus project receives funding based on a Grant Agreement following the regulations of the Digital Europe Programme and the eligibility rules of that Grant Agreement will apply for the direct costs arising in the sub-projects.

Consortia selected for funding via the proposal evaluation process will be invited to conclude a funding agreement with the FFplus project coordinator, the University of Stuttgart. That funding agreement will define the payment schedule, whereby payment will be made in multiple tranches, partly linked to the delivery of reports and outputs defined in the innovation study workplan and in the funding agreement itself. The principle followed will be that the sub-project participants will receive an advance payment at the start of the innovation study followed by subsequent instalments.

It is expressly foreseen that the targeted SMEs may participate in more than one tranche of innovation studies, that is, if developments and results of their initial innovation study are evaluated successfully, then they would be eligible to submit a proposal for an extension of the developments in a subsequent open call.

Innovation studies from the first tranche of FFplus sub-projects (i.e. those selected by the first open call) will have been informed by the FFplus project if the main SME participant is eligible to receive funding for an extension of the innovation study through the current open call. The remaining main SME participants from the first tranche of FFplus innovation studies are not eligible to receive further funding from the FFplus project.

It is a necessary condition for funding that the innovation study complies with the FFplus requirement for reporting of the results achieved up to the end of the 7th month of the innovation study to enable an evaluation of the impact potential, performed by external experts. The Annex to this document provides a summary of the evaluation process for the Month 7 reports.

Main participants from the top 70% of successful innovation studies (based on the ranking arising from the expert evaluation) will be eligible to submit a proposal for an extension of the study (should they wish to do so). The selection for funding of the extension submission will depend on the evaluation by

external independent experts, as usual. For avoidance of doubt, proposals for study extensions will be evaluated together with all other proposals to the subsequent open call.

The following funding conditions and eligibility criteria for participation apply:

1. A main participant is an SME or a Start-up and supporting participants are organisations assisting the main participant to complete activities foreseen for the innovation study.
2. Applications are to be submitted by the main participant who must provide a business case/challenge and optionally (if well justified) up to two supporting participants. Each consortium partner needs to have a clearly defined role.
3. The total number of consortium partners (main participant and supporting participants) is limited to three (3).
4. Only organisations established in
   a) an EU Member State or
   b) (non-EU countries:) listed EEA countries and countries associated to the Digital Europe Programme where the association agreement entered into force before the submission deadline of this call are eligible to receive funding. Natural persons (individuals) are not eligible to receive funding.
5. FFplus beneficiaries are ineligible to participate as either main or supporting participants.
6. The maximum duration of the innovation studies is 10 months, with a maximum of 200 K€ funding for the main participant SME. Where suitably justified, additional organisations might be included within a consortium designed to optimally address the targeted generative AI development. The maximum total funding for an innovation study with multiple partners is 300 K€, for an innovation study not including supporting partners it is 200 K€.
7. Funding limits for organisations participating as supporting participant: a maximum of 150 K€ under this open call (i.e. under call identifier FFplus_Call-2-Type-2); a maximum of 300 K€ over all FFplus innovation studies in the case that an organisation participates as supporting participant in more than one innovation study.
8. SME participation in the FFplus business experiments for HPC uptake and in the innovation studies, covered by this open call, are mutually exclusive. That is, for the SMEs whose business challenge defines the business experiment or innovation study, funding may only be provided for one type of action (Type 1 or Type 2 sub-project). This will be considered during the evaluation and selection process.
9. In principle, at least 50% of the funding applied for should be allocated to the main participant. Any deviations from this principle must be duly justified.
10. For supporting participants, only engineering/technical activities are eligible for funding. Activities such as business consultancy, marketing initiatives, administrative tasks, and other non-engineering/non-technical activities are not eligible for funding.

Proposals not adhering to the above will be rejected, for items 1 to 8 without a technical evaluation of the proposal being performed.

The budget modules available for innovation studies are listed in the table below, noting that costs for sub-contracting are not included (and thus ineligible for funding).

Budget module	Additional details
Personnel	Personnel costs need to be commensurate with the work to be performed
Equipment	Depreciation costs only. Only specialized equipment necessary for conducting the innovation study is permitted. Costs for common-use equipment such as laptops, monitors, etc., are not eligible.
Travel	Travel must be justified in terms of the necessity for performance of the proposed innovation study work plan.
HPC compute capacity	Compute Resources need to be justified. Ideally, EuroHPC systems will be used for the work. A decision not to apply for access to the EuroHPC systems should be duly justified.
Material	1. Costs for acquiring specialised SW licenses for conducting the innovation study (licenses for general office software, for example, are not eligible). 2. Costs for acquiring or using data sets or collections needed to conduct the innovation study.

Model exploitation, deployment or operation are all out of scope of activities eligible to be funded by the FFplus project. Revenue generated through deployment of the developed model during the funding phase of the study needs to be reported and impacts the final funding of the study.

The innovation studies will receive support from the project with a range of actions relating to interactions with the project and also relating to potential collaborations with other sub-projects. Furthermore, direct support for each individual innovation study will be provided relating to gaining access to EuroHPC JU-provided computing resources and technical consultation relating to the effective execution of the innovation study work plan.

Submission Details

Submission Dates

Proposal submission will be possible commencing on February 3rd, 2026 at 9:00 Brussels time. The call closure is dependent on the volume of proposals received: the call will be closed at the earliest of either (a) the point in time when 250 proposals have been received, or (b) 17:00 Brussels local time, February 25th 2026.

Electronic Submission

Proposal submission is exclusively in electronic form using the proposal submission tool accessible via the Fortissimo web-site:
https://www.ffplus-project.eu/en/open-call/innovation-studies/

The central component of proposal submission is the uploading of a spreadsheet containing administrative information and a PDF-document (whose size must not exceed 5.0 MB) compliant with the instructions on proposal structure given below.

Proposal format and structure

Proposals must be submitted in English. Each proposal must comprise two parts: Part A (containing administrative information) and Part B (containing the body of the proposal, the structure of which is explained below).

Part A of the proposal will be submitted as a spread-sheet containing a set of tables to provide administrative data, including a tabular list of proposal participants. The participant list should include for each participant the Participant Identification Code (PIC) issued by the European Commission[5], and valid address, telephone number and email contact data.

Only requested information should be included in Part A, conform with the template spreadsheet provided. Additional extraneous information will be deleted before evaluation. Proposers are explicitly requested not to make any changes to the template (e.g. no deletion or renaming of work sheets, rows or columns); major deviations from the template may lead to the proposal being rejected without further evaluation.

The main section of the proposal – Part B - must not exceed 13 pages in length (including the provision of scientific literature references and any appendices, but excluding the Part B cover page). The Part B text should be no smaller than 11-point Arial font; which applies also to images inserted into the proposal that provide textual information. **Proposals submitted with a Part B whose length (excluding the cover page) exceeds the 13-page limit will be rejected without further evaluation.**

It is an explicit requirement for eligible proposals to provide consistent information, for example concerning funding budget requests, in Part A and Part B of their proposal.

ALL PROPOSERS MUST TAKE CAREFUL NOTE OF THE ABOVE RULES.

[5] To obtain a PIC, register at
https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/how-to-participate/participant-register .

The structure of the proposal Part B (and **indicative** length per section) should be as follows (the maximum number of pages is the critical aspect as described above):

1. Summary (0.5 pages)
2. Industrial relevance, potential impact (including societal impact) and exploitation plans (3.5 pages)
3. Description of the work plan, technological/algorithmic approach, and software development strategy – please refer to the "Expectations" section above (5 pages)
4. Quality of the consortium as a whole and of the individual proposers (1-2 pages)
5. Justification of costs and resources (1-2 pages)

A management structure will be established for the successful proposals. That is, the proposal will not need to contain a description of how the management of the innovation study in the framework of the overall FFplus project will be achieved, but should include tasks for the technical management of the study activities.

Proposal templates for both Part A and Part B can be found at https://www.ffplus-project.eu/en/open-call/innovation-studies/

It is a requirement that these templates be followed and in particular that the breakdown of the proposal budget be provided using the embedded Excel spread-sheets in Part B. Furthermore, proposals providing inconsistent information in Part A and Part B will be rejected without further evaluation.

Evaluation Criteria

The criteria for evaluation will comprise:

1. Impact: covering the proposed innovation study's prospects for innovation, commercial viability and potentially also societal relevance, vision of success and value creation/proposition taking the SME's business models and exploitation plans into account, alignment with the objectives of the call.
2. Excellence: covering both conceptual and technical excellence.
    a. Conceptual excellence includes conceptual soundness, cohesiveness, and articulation of plans for bridging gaps to ensure successful innovation study implementation and impact.
    b. Technical excellence includes clear definition of technical requirements, justifying technology choices; articulation of performance metrics for model evaluation, scaling, and optimization; activities for establishing baseline performance and ensuring experiment reproducibility.
3. Implementation: covering the quality of the project's workplan and data management plan, the distribution of resources to additional organisations (where applicable), capacity of the

applicant(s) to carry out the proposed work, the justification for computation resources required.

Each criterion will be assigned a score between 0 and 5. The overall acceptance threshold (summed over all criteria) is set to 10, while a minimum score of 3 must be achieved for each criterion. All criteria are equally weighted. However, in case of a tie in the overall score ranking, proposals are ranked based on the individual criteria scoring applying the following priority: Impact, Excellence, Implementation, and finally total requested funding.

Submission and Evaluation Procedure

The proposal submission and evaluation procedure consists of the following steps:

1. proposal submission;
2. admissibility/eligibility check of the proposal;
3. first-stage evaluation (initial ranking) of proposals (if applicable);
4. final selection (second-stage evaluation) of the proposals;
5. Funding Decision

Submission of proposals

For the submission of the proposal, proposal templates provided by the FFplus project are to be used which should be submitted using an online tool accessible via the open call section of the FFplus website corresponding to this open call. . When you write your proposal, you must adhere to the funding and eligibility restrictions and format and structure described previously.
The call may close in advance of a final submission deadline, once 250 proposals have been received.

Admissibility/eligibility check

This step will assess whether your proposal will be taken into consideration. This will be determined on a number of administrative technical criteria concerning eligibility and proposal format and structure described previously. As explained earlier in this document, failure to adhere to the funding and eligibility restrictions and to the proposal format instructions will lead to immediate rejection of the proposal.

First-stage evaluation of proposals

In case the number of received admissible/eligible proposals exceeds 100 proposals, a two-stage selection procedure will be applied; the first-stage evaluation being as follows:
An initial ranking of proposals will be created based on the individual assessments and scores of the experts. From this ranking, the top set of proposals up to the cumulative funding that exceeds three times the number of proposals that can be funded within the available budget will be taken into the final (second-stage) evaluation. The remaining proposals will be rejected. Proposers whose proposal was rejected after the first evaluation stage will receive a short evaluation summary report comprising

the combined or consolidated findings of the independent expert evaluators addressing only key issues.

Final selection of proposals

The final selection of proposals (which is potentially the second stage evaluation) will employ a consensus review process; which process will be supported by the FFplus beneficiaries coordinating the open call. Building on the individual assessment reports, consensus sessions will be organised in which a moderator works with the two individual evaluators to create a consensus assessment report, representing the consensus position of both experts. The consensus report is turned into an evaluation summary report that will be shared with the proposing consortium comprising the consolidated findings of the expert evaluators.

Funding Decision

In all cases, as previously stated, proposers will be provided with a decision from the project on the result of the selection procedure. That decision is final and the project will not enter into discussions concerning the evaluation results, and no appeals process will be provided.

The successful proposal consortia selected for funding will be included as sub-projects on conclusion of a funding agreement between the University of Stuttgart (the FFplus project Coordinator) and the Partner(s) involved in the proposal. That funding agreement is provided on the project website and is non-negotiable and no changes or modifications are permitted. With the submission of a proposal, the proposer(s) acknowledge this.

Background to the evaluation procedure

Adherence to the proposal format and structure described previously – and notably to the prescribed page limit – will allow the independent external evaluators, see below, to evaluate the proposal against all of the above-mentioned evaluation criteria. As explained earlier in this document, failure to adhere to the funding and eligibility restrictions and to the proposal format instructions will lead to immediate rejection of the proposal.

Measures will be implemented to handle larger volumes of submitted proposals but nevertheless conclude the evaluation within the limits of the project's budget and time lines while maintaining a fair and impartial process. The first measure is the abovementioned call closure, in advance of a final submission deadline, once 250 proposals have been received. The subsequent measure is to employ a two-stage evaluation process. For both evaluation stages, the evaluation of proposals will be done by independent, external experts; two experts, with demonstrated competency in the field of the innovation study proposals, being assigned to each proposal. Their assessments will be done independently of one another.

Annex – Description of the Evaluation of Month 7 Reports

The Month 7 reports are in the form of the provision of responses to a set of questions concerning results achieved and their potential impact. The questionnaire is defined by the FFplus project and is a single questionnaire provided to all innovation studies in the tranche of studies funded under this call. Each study report will be evaluated by two independent external experts who will assess how well the responses address each question and to what extent the project expectations (as documented in the corresponding call text) are met. After the individual reviews, a consensus meeting will be held to align the evaluators' judgments and agree on the level of achievement for each question. These will then be used to generate an overall numerical score that is used to define the ranking of the tranche of innovation studies.