FFplus Call-3 – Type-1 – FAQ

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Consortium and Participants

Q: Are there restrictions on the organisations that may participate?

Successful proposals will be included in the FFplus Project as clearly defined activities within the project and new participants will be included as Third Parties contracted by the FFplus Coordinator, the University of Stuttgart. All organisations that are eligible to participate within the Digital Europe framework programme (for organisations from countries associated to the Digital Europe Programme, the association agreement must have entered into force before the submission deadline of this call) would be expected to be accepted for participation as Third Parties in FFplus.

The SME (main participant) should have had no prior use of, or experience with, HPC services and may only participate in one experiment. (See also: **"***Q: How should we interpret the requirement for main participant SMEs to have no prior experience with HPC?***")**

Please note, that all seven FFplus beneficiaries are ineligible to participate as either main or supporting participants. Please check the answer to the next question for a complete list of the seven excluded organisations.

SMEs with an academic focus, for example with business models around R&D services based on HPC software, or activities with a potential impact only in the long term, such as fundamental research, are not within the scope of the call.

Q: Who is not allowed to participate?

All seven FFplus beneficiaries are not allowed to take part in the open call:

- Universität Stuttgart
- scapos AG
- Arctur
- CINECA
- CESGA
- Teratec
- Cyfronet

Q: Which companies are SMEs and can participate as main participants?

The SME definition of the European Commission will be used: in particular, this means that an SME is an independent enterprise with less than 250 employees and an annual turnover below €50 M.

Before the conclusion of the funding agreements, the SME will be required to document their status as an SME in line with European Commission definitions.

Q: Can a consortium consist of two main participants?

The inclusion of two main participants (SMEs) with shared business challenges is foreseen explicitly in the call announcement and proposer's guide, which is the definitive document for the call.

Q: Can start-ups participate as main participants?

Yes, assuming that they also qualify as SME using the EC SME definition and are able to substantiate the expected business impact (e.g. by providing an analysis of the targeted market and their projected competitive advantage in that market).

Q: Are there any rules regarding the structure of the proposal consortium?

The FFplus Type-1 open calls are open to proposals that address business challenges from European SMEs from varied application domains, whereby SMEs whose adoption of advanced HPC services will create the highest business impact will be prioritized.

The expectation is that the consortium for the new experiment includes all necessary partners for the execution of the experiment.

With respect to the objective to promote a widening of the HPC user base amongst European SMEs, FFplus seeks to achieve a broad geographical distribution of participants. In particular, SMEs based in countries with previous HPC adoption at a low level are encouraged to submit a proposal and may expect to be assisted by their national HPC Competence Centre.

While single-member consortia are eligible in principle, the proposal would need to demonstrate that the sole partner is both an SME new to HPC and at the same time possesses all necessary skills to perform all tasks of the proposed experiment.

The total number of consortium partners (main participant(s) and supporting participants) is limited to five (5).

See also the questions:

- **"***Q: My company participated already in a prior Fortissimo/FFplus sub-project. Can we be a partner in an FFplus experiment?***"**
- **"***Q: Can supporting participants participate in Type-1 business experiments and Type-2 innovation studies? Are there any restrictions for this situation?***"**

Q: How should we interpret the requirement for main participant SMEs to have no prior experience with HPC?

As specified in the call announcement, the FFplus call for business experiments targets SMEs with "no prior use of, or experience with, HPC services". This essentially concerns the business activities of the organisation; thus, it concerns: HPC use for the development of products or services or for the organisation's business processes; and also the use of HPC by the SME's

products and services, e.g. by the organisation's customers. Main participant SMEs who have used HPC systems or services in those contexts would not be eligible for funding under this FFplus call. (See also **"***Q: Would a successful application for access to one of the EuroHPC JU supercomputers or AI Factory systems make the main participant SME ineligible to receive FFplus funding?***"**)

Q: Is it okay for supporting participants to have HPC knowledge and expertise?

Yes, indeed since the requirement is that the main participant has no prior experience with HPC, then a supporting participant with such knowledge and expertise might be expected to fulfil a necessary role in executing the experiment.

Q: Is it okay if there is one team member of the main participant that has HPC experience (e.g. from a prior work position or university)?

Yes, the requirement for the SME to have had no prior use of, or experience with, HPC services concerns the organisation and the past activities of that organisation.

Q: My company participated already in a prior Fortissimo/FFplus sub-project. Can we be a partner in an FFplus experiment?

An SME funded in a previous Fortissimo business experiment or innovation study would typically have the existing HPC experience that would exclude it from being funded as a main participant SME under this call. However, it is possible that they participate as supporting participant, which also applies to an SME that was the main participant in a Type 2 innovation study. In both cases this is subject to the overall funding limits for Type 1 and Type 2 sub-projects (see also the question **"***Q: Can supporting participants participate in Type-1 business experiments and Type-2 innovation studies? Are there any restrictions for this situation?*.**"**

Q: Would a successful application for access to one of the EuroHPC JU supercomputers or AI Factory systems make the main participant SME ineligible to receive FFplus funding?

This would depend on the actual use of EuroHPC JU systems prior to the proposal submission to FFplus; which use should be clearly explained in the proposal. (See also **"***Q: How should we interpret the requirement for main participant SMEs to have no prior experience with HPC?***"**). The specific purpose of the prior access to EuroHPC JU HPC systems would determine whether or not prior business use took place. For example, an initial evaluation of some appropriate software as preparation for the work planned for the proposed business experiment would not be a ground for ineligibility for funding. Most importantly, the call prioritises the development of the main participant SME's innovation potential and the proposal must make clear that the proposed activities clearly lead to such an innovation development above and beyond any prior experience through the EuroHPC access schemes.

Q: Is an SME with experience in small scale simulations but without regular usage of large machines considered ineligible to be a main participant?

As explained for the question **"***Q: Are there concrete expectations for the minimum amount of HPC resources to be used?***"**, there is a requirement for HPC to be necessary for the business experiment and that need should exceed what would be considered as typical in-house resources. Such in-house resources would be, for example, a single high-core-count workstation or a compact, single-node multi-core server. If the SME has experience using limited size in-house systems this should be explained in the proposal and does not constitute an ineligibility to be a main participant in the proposal. The proposal should clearly document that the organisation has not previously used HPC for its business.

Q: Can a single organisation submit several proposals?

An SME may have the role of main participant in only one FFplus experiment. While an SME could be main participant of several proposals, we strongly recommend to concentrate on a single proposal.

There are no formal restrictions on the number of proposals in which a supporting participant participates. However, the funding restriction for supporting participants (a maximum aggregated funding of € 150,000 for all experiments in which they take part in) must of course be considered.

Q: Can supporting participants participate in Type-1 business experiments and Type-2 innovation studies? Are there any restrictions for this situation?

Supporting participants can participate in both Type-1 experiments and Type-2 innovation studies if their roles are well justified. Of course, they need to adhere to the funding restrictions for both types: 150,000 € for Type-1 business experiments over all FFplus calls, for Type-2 innovation studies 300,000 € for supporting participants over all Type-2 calls. See also **"***Q: Are there any rules regarding the structure of the proposal consortium?***".**

Q: Does an international consortium add value to a proposal?

For proposals in which the need for a consortium of participants is justified, the key criterium for the construction of the consortium is the competence to carry out the tasks of the work plan. Since the international collaborative aspect within FFplus is achieved at the level of the project and all its sub-projects, there is no added value assigned to a proposal with international participants compared with participants from a single country.

Q: Can supporting partners be the coordinator of the experiments?

For supporting partners only engineering/technical activities are eligible for funding. This means that coordination activities are not eligible for funding for supporting partners.

Q: Can an SME apply as main participant if they belong to a holding company in a non-EU country?

First, the SME has to check whether the ownership, or part ownership, of the holding company negatively impacts on their status as an SME. Additionally, they need to check whether they are eligible to receive Digital Europe funding, i.e. whether the company head office is within an EU member state or in a country associated to the Digital Europe programme.

An SME based in a country eligible to receive Digital Europe funding – and having the competence and resources to perform the planned work in that country – is eligible to receive FFplus funding even if fully-owned by a parent company from a country ineligible to receive Digital Europe funding.

Q: Can a participant that was rejected in a previous call apply again in a subsequent call?

Yes, this is not a problem.

Q: Is it possible to have more than one supporting participant, e.g. a consortium consisting of the main SME, a supporting SME and an HPC provider?

Yes, this is possible as long as the business case is defined by the main participant SME. Additionally, in principle, at least 50% of the funding should be allocated to the main participant. Any deviations from this principle must be duly justified. For Type-1 business experiments, the maximum number of partners in the consortium is five.

Q: Can the participants of the business experiment be public entities/public administrations or universities or research centres?

The main participant cannot be a public entity, administration, university or research centre because it has to be an SME or start-up. However, public entities (e.g. hospitals) or organisations belonging to public administrations can be supporting participants if their role in the proposed sub-project is well justified. Universities or research centres can also be supporting participants. But note that for supporting participants, only engineering/technical activities are eligible for funding.

Q: We provide HPC services directly to SMEs. Would that make us a supporting participant in the experiment?

If the SME is simply ‘‘purchasing" service from your organisation, then that would not really mean that your company would need to be a participant. The supporting participants should have a clearly defined role in the work plan (noting that there is the restriction that ‘‘only engineering/technical activities are eligible for funding”).

See also: **“***Q: Do FFplus proposals have the possibility to include the use of non-EuroHPC resources?***”**

Timeline & Administrative Issues, Proposal Structure and Templates

Q: Will there be further FFplus calls for business experiments?

No, this will be the final call for business experiments for the FFplus project.

Q: What is the time-line for evaluation & commencement?

The target is for the new experiments to commence at the beginning of August 2027 at the latest. We expect to be able to communicate the results of the evaluation of proposals by early June 2027.

Q: Which kind of support will the experiments receive from FFplus?

The experiments 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 experiment will be provided relating to gaining access to EuroHPC JU-provided computing resources (please refer to: supercomputers access; AI Factories access) and technical consultation relating to the effective execution of the experiment work plan.

Q: How long should Part B of the proposal be?

Proposals submitted with a Part B whose length (excluding the cover page) exceeds the 10-page limit will be rejected without further evaluation.

Please note, that during past open calls, there have been some issues connected with the export of “Google docs” documents to the final pdfs. This sometimes led to blank pages or page breaks being inserted which created a final pdf document with more than 10 pages. If you use an online tool for writing of the proposal, please be careful to check the page count before submitting.

Q: Should the proposal include a detailed work plan with information about effort per partner and planned work for each month?

There is a strict page limit for Part B of the proposal (10 pages for Type-1 business experiments). This obviously also poses a limit on the level of information you can provide. It is important, that the external experts evaluating the proposals can understand who is doing which work and with which amount of effort. Please provide all information that is requested in the template/exemplar for Part B of the proposal, which includes a table of effort per partner.

Q: What is the requirement for attending meetings?

Sub-projects with multi-partner consortia might organise internal meetings in order to effectively coordinate and monitor their activities. If these meetings would lead to substantial travel costs, online meetings should be preferred.

Meetings organised by FFplus which are mandatory for experiment partners or coordinators will in general be held online. At least one representative of the experiment should attend the kick-off meeting for all experiments of the respective tranche, which will be organised by FFplus near to the commencement of the experiment. The business experiment should also be represented at one FFplus review meeting (with external experts appointed by EuroHPC), whereby both key technical and business impact aspects should be presented. That meeting would normally be scheduled close to the completion of the tranche of business experiments.

Q: What is the expected effort amount for deliverables and dissemination?

No specific amount of effort is expected. However, contributions to the creation of the success stories and other FFplus promotional material are required, while costs relating to (other) dissemination actions are ineligible for funding.

Q: Is a PIC number required for submitting a proposal?

Yes, for each partner the PIC (Participant Identification Code) is required, and the information is to be included in Part A of the proposal.

Q: Does a letter of support (proving the business impact) improve a proposal?

Part A only contains standardised administrative information (as a spreadsheet) and cannot include a letter of support. In Part B it is permissible (however, in most cases not necessary) to include a letter of support if the proposal still meets the page limit (10 pages for business experiments).

Funding and eligible costs

Q: What is the funding model and which financial restrictions apply?

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.

An example (template) of the funding agreement can be downloaded from here. The funding agreement is essentially fixed for all sub-projects and not to subject to negotiation. However, minor, non-material administrative modifications may be considered only where strictly necessary for implementation purposes and where they do not affect the core principles of equal treatment and regulatory compliance.

The maximum total funding is 200 K€ for business experiment with multiple partners, for a business experiment not including supporting partners it is 150 K€. However, these are maximum figures and the proposal evaluators will be asked to pay attention to the planned resources (effort & budget) being commensurate with the stated objectives of the experiment.

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.

In particular, Third Parties will receive 100% funding of incurred eligible direct costs necessary for the completion of experiment activities; no indirect costs or overheads will be funded.

The maximum funding that can be allocated to any Third Party is € 150,000 – for supporting participants this is aggregated across all FFplus experiments in which that Third Party is involved.

In principle, at least 50% of the requested funding should be allocated to the main participants. Any deviations from this principle must be duly justified.

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.

More information about eligibility of costs for equipment, travel, HPC compute capacity and material are available in the call announcement. Please note that costs for sub-contracting are ineligible for funding. Furthermore, the following costs relating to dissemination actions are ineligible for funding: costs for dissemination material; costs relating to the organisation of dissemination events; fees for participation at conferences, exhibitions or other events. For avoidance of doubt, the activities related to the creation of FFplus success stories are not considered to be included in the category of “dissemination activities” and are thus eligible for funding.

Q: Which activities for supporting participants are eligible for funding?

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.

Q: Are travel costs eligible?

Travel must be well justified in terms of the necessity for performance of the proposed experiment work plan. Travel costs for dissemination and demonstration purposes are not eligible and cannot be claimed, even if they are included in the proposal.

Q: Are personnel costs for SME owners eligible?

Yes, the work of SME owners not receiving a salary may be declared as personnel costs, if they fulfil the general eligibility conditions and are calculated as unit costs. For more details please check the rules of the Digital Europe Programme, given in the model grant agreement.

Q: Are software licenses and depreciation costs eligible costs? For main and supporting participants?

Yes, for all participants if they are well justified and conform with the guidelines specified in the (call announcement. As noted there in relation to the budget modules table, costs for the budget module “Material” need to be commensurate with the overall requested budget and with the scope of business innovation targeted by the proposed experiment.

Q: Is the sub-project funding based on a lump sum mechanism?

The lump sum funding mechanism used in parts of the current EC programmes is not applicable to the funding agreements that will be used for the FFplus sub-projects. The payments to the consortia (which might be single organisation ‘‘consortia”) will be made in multiple steps, with a first payment at the start of the sub-project.

Q: Are cost reports required?

There will be the need for reporting to the FFplus coordinator, HLRS (part of the University of Stuttgart), on costs arising.

For more details check the funding agreement (downloadable from the call page) which will be used for the Business Experiments.

Q: When will the payments be made?

The details will be covered in the funding agreements to be concluded between the University of Stuttgart (HLRS) and the 3rd parties (which is available from here)

For the business experiments, there will be three payments: 30% in advance, a second payment in Month 7 (after submission of the financial report) and then the remainder on completion of the experiment.

Q: Can we include overhead costs (e.g., for office rent, electricity costs, personnel insurances, etc.) or only pure salaries?

For the FFplus sub-projects, indirect costs or overheads cannot be funded. This is stated explicitly in the call announcement and applies to all participants (main and supporting). The personnel costs need to be calculated in line with the Digital Europe model grant agreement, which includes some salary-related costs for the employer, but not the indirect costs such as office and electricity. Please refer to the EC's annotated grant agreement.

The FFplus funding agreements for the sub-projects (template for the business experiments is available from here) will use cost claims based on actual costs. This is covered in the annotated grant agreement linked above.

Q: Regarding the personnel costs, are costs related to non-engineering staff (administrative, dissemination, commercial, etc.) covered by the grant funds?

For supporting participants only technical activities are eligible to be funded (referred to in the call text as ‘‘engineering/technical activities”). There is no explicit limitation on the type of staff that could be used, but obviously a technical role would actually require technical staff. For the main participant SME, all staff necessary to perform the work, including technical management, are eligible.

Q: Is FFplus funding subject to the de minimis limits?

No, FFplus is entirely funded under the Digital Europe Programme, managed by the EuroHPC Joint Undertaking. In that way, the funding, including the Financial Support to Third Parties, is centrally managed by the European Commission, not by national authorities. The de minimis aid regulation only applies to aid granted by Member States or through state resources. For that reason, FFplus is not subject to de minimis limits or reporting requirements.

HPC Computing Resources

Q: Do the applications in experiments have to target use of HPC systems?

Yes. The use of high-performance computing is central to FFplus. The expectation for the experiments is that they demonstrate the impact of solving SME business challenges through the use of HPC systems or advanced HPC services. The use of HPC systems should contribute to the development of the innovation potential of the participating SMEs, which is also directly targeted and an important objective for the proposed business experiments (as stated in the announcement and proposers' guide).

Compute resources need to be clearly described and justified: ideally, EuroHPC systems will be used for the work. A decision not to apply for access to EuroHPC systems should be duly justified.

Q: How can experiments access the EuroHPC JU compute resources – are they expected to use the usual access schemes?

Yes, there are no special access rules for the FFplus business experiments and they are expected to use the (appropriate) usual access schemes (please refer to: supercomputers access; AI Factories access).

In order to avoid potential delays for the execution phase of business experiments selected for funding, it is recommended that proposers inform themselves about the available access schemes. Please note that organisations may need to validate their status by providing a VAT identification number (in addition to a Participant Identification Code (PIC) - see also the Question **"***Q: Is a PIC number required for submitting a proposal?***"**); proposers are advised to check the EuroHPC JU's regulations for the specific access scheme). While it is assumed that most experiments will be able to use one of the access schemes with relatively quick turn-around times, the schemes for larger amounts of compute resources have less frequent cut-off dates and this might require early application. In addition, it should be noted that certain access schemes are governed by a peer review process that handle all submissions equally, whether academic or business/industrial. Such would require the business-focused FFplus proposal to be adapted to emphasize the technical/scientific aspects.

There is no guarantee, but experience from previous tranches of business experiments indicates that problems are few and eventually could be solved. 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.

Q: How to be sure that EuroHPC will assign the computing resources in a short timeframe considering that the experiments last no longer than 15 months?

The recommendation is to use access calls with many cut-off dates and short application processes, for example benchmark or development access and to apply before the start of the proposed experiment. The application process for benchmark or development access usually takes only one month.

Q: Are there concrete expectations for the minimum amount of HPC resources to be used?

No, but the general need for HPC is important. As an indication, the HPC resources required for the proposed experiment should clearly exceed those provided by a single high-core-count workstation or a compact, single-node multi-core server.

Q: Do FFplus proposals have the possibility to include the use of non-EuroHPC resources?

The expectation that the EuroHPC systems be used comes from the JU and relates to a number of aspects: access to those systems is provided free-of-charge; those large systems have been procured for use by the EU R&D&I ecosystem; private, in-house systems might not have the same scale of resources. Similar systems offered by national research programmes are considered equivalent.

Nevertheless, it is not excluded that other systems be used for the business experiments. 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 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 costs' of the partner providing the HPC resources to the experiment consortium.

Q: Which information about the planned use of HPC resources should be included in the proposal?

In general, the expectation for the FFplus proposals is that the expected volume of necessary computing resources is clearly explained and linked to the proposed workplan. Proposals should present the actual need for HPC resources by describing in sufficient detail the type of computational methods to be used and the relevant sizes (e.g. of models and data) and numbers (e.g. of runs or iterations) from which the required HPC resources have been deduced in terms of core or GPU hours, where appropriate for each task.

Additionally, the approach for system access has to be explained (in Part B, at the end of the workplan description): either using EuroHPC resources (free-of-charge) or the need for use of

charged/ commercial services (which might be linked to the business challenge and always has to be carefully justified). If commercial/charged services are used, then the corresponding costs must be included in the proposal budget (in part B of the proposal).

Other

Q: Does the experiment have to focus on particular types of applications?

No, the FFplus Type-1 open calls are open to proposals that address business challenges from European SMEs from varied application domains, whereby SMEs whose adoption of advanced HPC services will create the highest business impact will be prioritized.

Q: What is meant by the target for complementary experiments?

Proposed experiments should complement those already included in the past Fortissimo, Fortissimo 2 and FF4EuroHPC projects (see for example their success stories) as well as the first two tranches of FFplus business experiments. In this context, complementarity is understood to mean activities that address new applications, business cases, industrial sectors and market segments and enhance the project's ability to demonstrate the impact of the Fortissimo approach for a broad set of industrial users. Proposals that just extend past experiments are thus not considered to be complementary.

Q: The FFplus innovation experiments (covered by the Type-2 Calls) focus on generative AI and large language models. Is it okay to write a proposal for Type-1 business experiments using AI technologies?

Yes, the Type-1 business experiments can still be centred on AI, HPDA or Big Data technologies. For Type-1 business experiments it is essential that the main participant has no prior experience with HPC (See also: "*Q: How should we interpret the requirement for main participant SMEs to have no prior experience with HPC?*"). The technology that is used to solve the SME's business challenge can come from different areas, most importantly numerical simulation, AI or HPDA.

Type-2 innovation studies focus on SMEs or Start-ups highly competent in generative AI but lacking large computing infrastructures.

Please note, that participation as main participant in the FFplus innovation studies and in the business experiments is mutually exclusive.

Q: Are there any rules about IP, particularly regarding the relationship between the main and the supporting participants?

IP stays within the experiment consortium. The recommendation is to have a Consortium Agreement. Joint development usually means joint ownership.