

Research & Policy Grant for Early Career Researchers Call for Proposals—2025 Edition

A joint initiative of the European Commission (DG Education, Youth, Sport and Culture – DG EAC) and the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) for secondary analyses of IEA international large-scale assessment data

Why the Research & Policy Grant?

The **Research & Policy (R&P) Grant for Early Career Researchers** is an annual initiative designed to support promising early career scholars in producing high-quality **secondary analyses of international large-scale assessment (ILSA) data** from IEA studies.

This award enables researchers working in different fields related to IEA data to develop their own research project while benefiting from the support of experts at the two partner institutions (IEA and DG EAC), with a particular focus on mathematics, science, digital, and citizenship skills. The objective of the grant is to generate research that contributes to the **development and strengthening of basic skills¹ in the European Education Area (EEA)**, using data from IEA studies such as **TIMSS, PIRLS, ICCS, and ICILS**. This initiative aims to promote capacity building, policy-relevant research, and international collaboration in the field of education.

Who can apply?

Early career researchers of all nationalities working in education research are welcome to apply, and interdisciplinary approaches are encouraged. Eligible applicants include PhD candidates as well as researchers who received their first doctoral degree within five years of the application deadline. Further details about eligibility can be found below.

Applicants are strongly encouraged to be supported by at least one senior researcher or policy expert (hereafter referred to as “supervisor”) with expertise in the call’s topic and the ability to provide guidance throughout the project.

What type of visits and training are expected?

Grant recipients are strongly encouraged to participate in a summer training program that is expected to last up to one week, and is organized by IEA Hamburg usually between August and September. This training will be focused on the use of IEA data, advanced quantitative methods, and policy-relevant research communication. Registration fees will be waived for grant awardees, and where participation is subject to capacity constraints, grant recipients will be given priority access to these training opportunities. Participation in training activities is expected to be covered by the

¹ <https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/school-education/basic-skills>

researcher/s or their home institution. Participation may be mandatory for grant recipients with limited experience in secondary analysis of international large-scale assessment data.

In addition, grant recipients may, on an optional basis and at their own or their institution's expense, spend time at IEA Hamburg or at the International Study Centers for all IEA studies to work under the guidance of a supervisor involved with the relevant study. Such visits are intended to support the methodological development of the project.

The specific plans for training participation and potential visits will be discussed and agreed upon during an initial kick-off meeting with each grant recipient. This meeting will also be used to discuss the substantive focus and orientation of the project, with the aim of maximizing its relevance for European education policy.

What topics are expected?

Research proposals should investigate the research topics and study data proposed in the call. Applicants are expected to provide details regarding the data they intend to utilize for their research project. The topics in scope are:

1. Foundational Skills in Primary Education (Grade 4)

This topic focuses on early reading, mathematics, and science competences and their relationship with learning dispositions, home resources, and instructional practices. It supports EU priorities on improving basic skills and reducing early disadvantage. Potential research questions include: How do foundational skills co-develop in Grade 4? Which learner or school factors promote balanced performance? Which teaching practices help narrow socio-economic gaps at an early stage?

2. Digital Well-being and Social Media

This topic examines students' ICT and social media use and its links to digital literacy, academic performance, and well-being, reflecting the Digital Education Action Plan's focus on healthy digital habits. Potential research questions include: How does different social media use relate to digital skills and achievement? Is intensive use linked to lower engagement or well-being? Which school strategies foster safer and more balanced digital behavior?

3. Equity and Social Inclusion

This topic investigates disparities in learning and engagement related to socio-economic background, migration, language, disability, or geography, in line with EU inclusion goals. Analyses may bring insights from multiple studies. Potential research questions include: How large are achievement and engagement gaps across groups and systems? Which school characteristics—such as inclusive climate or language support—reduce these gaps? Which systems achieve both high performance and high equity?

4. Democratic Values and Citizenship

This topic focuses on students' civic knowledge, democratic attitudes, trust, and participation, and how schools cultivate active and inclusive citizenship. It aligns with EU priorities on democratic resilience. Potential research questions include: How do civic knowledge levels

relate to democratic attitudes and engagement? Which school practices—such as open discussions or student voice—strengthen citizenship outcomes? How do socio-economic or migration-related differences affect engagement?

What financial award will be given?

Awardees will receive a grant of €20,000, awarded directly to the principal investigator as a lump sum or alternatively to their institution, to cover professional development and project-related activities (e.g., travel, software, dissemination, networking).

What is the duration of the research project?

The research project must be completed within 12 months of the official grant start date. Grant recipients will be given priority access to a training visit at IEA Hamburg, planned for summer 2026 and lasting up to one week. Awardees can negotiate optional research visits to IEA Hamburg or to the International Study Centers, and use the grant to fund them.

Application Process

Aims of the program:

- Enhance researchers' projects and interests;
- Provide researchers with direct access to data from IEA studies, such as TIMSS, PIRLS, ICCS, and ICILS, to carry out their research projects; and
- Provide the opportunity to collaborate with research and policy staff from DG EAC and IEA to promote capacity building, policy-relevant research, and international collaboration in the field of education.

Expectations of the awarded researcher:

- Researchers are expected to work on an original comparative research project, potentially aiming for an open-source publication.
- Projects must focus on comparative secondary analysis of IEA ILSA data with clear EU policy relevance to basic skills development according to the list of topics stated above.
- Researchers are expected to be familiar with the use of ILSA data, quantitative research methods, and policy-relevant communication. In cases of limited or no experience on these topics, the researcher will be expected to participate in a training or academy at IEA Hamburg, lasting up to one week.
- Researchers are expected to participate in a kick-off meeting with the IEA and the European Commission to fine-tune the project and maximize its policy relevance, as well as in at least one intermediate meeting to report on progress.
- Preliminary results must be made available to the European Commission at least 6 months prior to any public release (including presentations or publications). Papers may be submitted to journals for peer review before the embargo period. Presentation of preliminary results to a limited audience at conferences is possible to contribute to constructive improvements.

- Each project must result in a final report of publishable quality. Subject to review, the report may be considered for publication in IEA's peer-reviewed *Large-scale Assessments in Education* journal. The maximum length of report should be 50 pages excluding references and annexes.
- Researchers are expected to present and discuss their results at a technical meeting or seminar at the European Commission (DG EAC) in Brussels.
- There will be three project-related meetings (kick-off, intermediate, and final), which may be held either online or in person in Hamburg or in Brussels. While in-person meetings are preferred, the EC and IEA will decide later. Travel costs for these meetings should be borne by the grant.

Awardees will be provided with:

- A financial award covering the researcher's own time and expenses;
- Training opportunities and expert support for their specific topic; and
- The option (at their own or institutional expense) to spend additional time up to one week at IEA Hamburg, working under the guidance of a senior IEA researcher.

Eligibility

To qualify for the researcher award, the applicant will need to:

1. Be a PhD candidate or have received their first doctoral degree within five years of the application deadline. Alternatively, have at least a master's degree combined with less than 10 years of additional research experience
2. Propose a research project relevant to basic skills² and education policies in the EEA, using data from one or more IEA studies.
3. Provide evidence of an arranged collaboration with a supervisor who has contributed to the proposal's development and who has relevant expertise in the call topic, IEA data, and the methodological approaches required for the proposed research. In addition to a supervisor, applicants may—but are not required to—include additional researchers.
4. Obtain the necessary visa and arrange their own travel to IEA in Hamburg, Germany for the mandatory training or extended stay, and/or any research visit to DG EAC in Brussels, Belgium.
5. Present proof of valid medical insurance coverage for the stay.
6. Demonstrate a proficient level of written and spoken English (e.g. through prior study, publications, recognized language certificates, or professional experience conducted in English).

To be eligible, applicants must meet all six conditions. If applicants cannot meet one or more of these conditions, applicants should postpone the application until all conditions can be met.

² <https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/school-education/basic-skills>

How to apply

To apply, provide the following:

1. **Project proposal**, written in English and structured according to the following four sections:
 - **Summary** (max. 200 words): Each proposal should begin with a concise summary of the planned project. The summary should clearly state the main research question, specify the data sources to be used—such as one or more IEA studies—and outline the objectives and scope of the research, including its relevance for education policy and decision-making related to basic skills development in the European Education Area.
 - **Background and state of research** (max. 600 words): This section should describe the theoretical framework and scientific relevance of the project, situate the study within the existing literature, and identify the research gap the proposed project aims to address. Applicants should also explain how their work relates to IEA data and to European Education Area initiatives focusing on basic skills and clarify how the expected findings could contribute to evidence-informed education policy discussions.
 - **Research questions and hypotheses** (max. 400 words): In this part, applicants should formulate clear and testable research questions and, where appropriate, specify explicit hypotheses. They should explain how their study addresses the identified research gap and discuss the expected theoretical or empirical contribution to the field and indicate how the research questions are relevant for policy debates or policy-relevant challenges related to basic skills.
 - **Data and methodology** (max. 900 words): The final section should present the planned empirical work in detail to allow reviewers to assess its rigor and feasibility. Applicants should specify which IEA datasets will be used, including relevant study cycles and key variables, and describe and justify the analytical approach and statistical procedures to be applied.
2. **CV** of the researcher with a record of publications
3. **Names and affiliation of any additional researchers** (with a record of publications listed, if applicable)
4. **Proof of doctorate or master's degree award** date for the researcher (e.g. certificate or university letter) **or enrolment in a doctoral degree**
5. **Recommendation letter** from the supervisor including a short description of the supervisor's expertise relevant to the proposed research (if applicable)
6. **Letter of support** from the host institution (confirming researcher's status and research leave, if applicable)

Information and documents (pdf format only) must be submitted electronically at:
<https://iea.grantplatform.com/>

Further information is available at: iea.nl/about/opportunities/rpgrant

Applicants are reminded that an individual may assume the role of Researcher in only one application across the four thematic areas. Participation in other proposals as an additional researcher member is unrestricted.

Selection process

The deadline for applications is Tuesday, 31 March 2026 at 23:59 CET. All applications will be screened for eligibility and then reviewed by members of an academic committee, with each proposal reviewed by at least one expert from each of the two partner institutions.

All proposals will be evaluated against the four criteria listed below. Each criterion is scored on a **1–5 scale**, where higher scores indicate stronger performance. All criteria carry **equal weight**. Reviewers will provide brief written comments to justify their scores and highlight strengths and areas for improvement.

To be considered suitable for funding, proposals must meet **both** of the following conditions:

1. **Minimum score of 3** in *each* individual criterion;
2. **Minimum total score of 15** across all criteria (out of a maximum of 20).

Proposals that do not meet these thresholds will not be eligible for funding.

1. Scientific Quality and Policy relevance

Description:

Assessment of the clarity, relevance, and importance of the proposed research questions; soundness and coherence of the theoretical framework; extent to which the study engages with prior research, including relevant international large-scale assessment (ILSA) literature; clarity and credibility of the project's policy relevance for the EEA, including its potential contribution to evidence-informed EU education policy; and overall degree of innovation and expected contribution to educational research.

Scoring Guide:

- 1 – Very weak: unclear questions, poor justification, limited or no theoretical grounding.
- 2 – Weak: partially clear but insufficiently justified or poorly linked to educational research.
- 3 – Adequate: well-formulated but conventional questions with acceptable theoretical framing.
- 4 – Strong: well-grounded, relevant, and showing clear potential for meaningful contribution.
- 5 – Excellent: highly original, theoretically robust, and clearly advancing current knowledge.

2. Use of Data and Methodological Rigor

Description:

Assessment of whether the selected IEA dataset(s) are appropriate for addressing the research questions; quality, sophistication, and feasibility of the analytical approach; and the extent to which the proposal demonstrates understanding of ILSA methodological requirements (e.g., sampling design, weights, plausible values, and handling of missing data).

Scoring Guide:

- 1 – Very weak: clear mismatch between data and research questions; flawed or unclear methods.
- 2 – Weak: limited justification for dataset choice or insufficient methodological detail.
- 3 – Adequate: broadly appropriate design with acceptable methodological reasoning.
- 4 – Strong: well-justified analytical strategy showing solid understanding of ILSA data.
- 5 – Excellent: rigorous, fully justified approach with high methodological sophistication.

3. Feasibility and Work Plan

Description:

Assessment of the realism and coherence of the work plan, timeline, and proposed activities; match between objectives, duration, and requested resources; clarity of outputs and deliverables; and overall viability of completing the project within the funding period.

Scoring Guide:

- 1 – Very weak: unrealistic or unclear work plan; insufficient detail; unlikely to be completed.
- 2 – Weak: partly feasible but missing important milestones or structure.
- 3 – Adequate: feasible plan with acceptable structure but limited detail or precision.
- 4 – Strong: well-organized, achievable plan with clear milestones and deliverables.
- 5 – Excellent: highly feasible, detailed, and fully aligned with objectives and resources.

4. Expertise and Capacity of the Researcher

Description:

Assessment of the expertise and experience of the principal investigator and additional researchers; demonstrated ability to conduct advanced analyses of ILSA data; complementarities of skills where multiple team members are involved; and evidence of prior high-quality research relevant to the proposed study.

Scoring Guide:

- 1 – Very weak: limited or no relevant expertise; insufficient methodological capacity.
- 2 – Weak: some relevant experience but significant gaps in required skills.
- 3 – Adequate: generally appropriate expertise with acceptable capacity to deliver the project.
- 4 – Strong: clear expertise with good track record and strong methodological skills.
- 5 – Excellent: highly qualified team with extensive experience and strong ILSA-related output.

A maximum of four proposals per year will be funded. For each of the four topics, funding will be awarded to the highest-scoring proposal that meets the eligibility and quality thresholds. If a topic receives no eligible proposals, the funding may instead support the second-highest-scoring eligible proposal from another topic. The choice of which second-ranked proposal to fund will rest solely with the Commission, based on its relevance to policy objectives.

If fewer than four proposals qualify for funding overall, only those meeting the standards will be supported, and any unused funding capacity may be carried over to the following year. Researchers

may resubmit their proposals in subsequent calls, provided they remain aligned with the thematic priorities of those calls.

The award decision will be taken by DG EAC and IEA senior management based on the eligible proposals' merit and scoring by the members of the academic committee. Candidates will be notified of acceptance or rejection no later than 31 May 2026.

Successful applicants will conclude a research agreement with IEA where the research proposal constitutes the statement of work, with an opportunity for refinement based on the reviewers' feedback. The research agreement will set out the framework for the funding and its terms and conditions, particularly concerning progress reports, training (if needed) and colloquium attendance, draft and final reports, and their review, revision, and acceptance. Formally, the research agreement will set the start and end day of the agreement, payment schedules, grounds for termination, confidentiality and data protection, as well as the above-mentioned six-month embargo on publishing results following the submission of the draft report. The research agreement will also regulate intellectual property rights, which shall generally be vested in the researcher with full credit given, but include an appropriate return license to DG EAC and IEA to freely use the results in its own work and communication. The partners are generally committed to the principle of open access/science and would prefer resulting publications to be open.

Successful proposals, provided that a research agreement is in place, will be announced on the partners' websites, through social media or similar channels. On completion, resulting reports and/or journal articles may also be posted to or linked from the partners' websites.

At the partners' discretion, rejected proposals might be invited for resubmission or can be resubmitted by the applicant for subsequent calls, provided that substantial concerns and feedback are addressed in a revised proposal. On request, the reviewers' comments on the proposal will be provided.

No applicant shall have any claim for any compensation of any kind whatsoever as a result of participating in this Call. All information sent by applicants will be treated as confidential, used only for the review process, and not shared with any third party. The initiative aims to award 4 projects annually. There is no obligation on the side of the partners to award all projects if there is an insufficient number of proposals meeting minimum quality criteria.

Timeline

- **Call opens:** 3 February 2026
- **Submission:** 31 March 2026 (23:59 CET)
- **Notification of results:** before or latest by 15 June 2026
- **Training or academy in Hamburg:** Summer 2026 (late August/early September assumed)
- **Draft results discussed with and available to the European Commission:** no later than 30 April 2027
- **Project completion:** no later than 30 June 2027
- **End of embargo:** 31 October 2027

For questions or clarifications, please contact: rpgrant@iea.nl. We look forward to receiving your proposals and supporting the next generation of researchers contributing to education policy and practice through innovative use of IEA data.