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Research & Policy Grant for Early Career Researchers
Call for Proposals — 2027 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

Introduction

The **Research & Policy (R&P) Grant for Early Career Researchers** is an initiative designed to support up to four 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 projects while benefiting from the support of experts at the two partner institutions (IEA and DG EAC), with a particular focus on literacy, mathematics, science, digital, and citizenship skills. The objective of the grant is to generate research that contributes to the **development and strengthening of basic skills[1] 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 school education in the EU.

The main deliverable under this grant is a final **report of publishable quality**, which focuses on **comparative secondary analyses of IEA data** with clear **EU policy relevance to basic skills development** and the topics listed in this call document. Such reports must yield original quantitative analyses focusing on EU Member States and all third countries associated with the Erasmus+ programme, as well as partner countries within the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership, with perspectives that can inform DG EAC's annual Education and Training Monitor[2]. Final reports should not exceed 50 pages (excluding annexes and references).

Eligibility Criteria

Early career researchers of all nationalities working in education research are welcome to apply, and applicants' academic background should be in a field related to education and social sciences, such as education science, psychology, or pedagogy. Eligible applicants include **PhD candidates** as well as researchers who received their **first doctoral degree within five years of the application deadline.**

Successful applicants will be familiar with the use of **International Large-Scale Assessment (ILSA) data**, have a proven **background in quantitative methods**, and be experienced in **policy-relevant research and communication**.

Applicants are warmly encouraged to seek the support of a senior researcher or policy expert (hereafter referred to as the "supervisor"). The supervisor should have extensive expertise in the call's

[1] https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/school-education/basic-skills

[2] https://education.ec.europa.eu/about-eea/education-and-training-monitor

topic, familiarity with ILSA data, and the ability to provide guidance throughout the project. **A supervisor is mandatory for applicants who are currently enrolled in a PhD or have limited experience working with ILSA data. While applicants who hold a PhD may apply without a supervisor, they must demonstrate sufficient expertise through at least one published paper relevant to the field of educational research.** Applicants may also name colleagues as additional researchers, provided their CVs and publication records are included in the application.

All work and communications will be conducted in **English**, and as such applicants must demonstrate a proficient level of written and spoken English allowing them to collaborate and present their research in English. They should also be able and prepared to travel to IEA's Hamburg offices in Germany or DG EAC in Brussels, Belgium for any training opportunities or required meetings.

If you are not sure whether you are eligible, please consult the FAQs document on IEA's website for further details. For queries not answered in the FAQs document, please email RPgrant@iea.nl for further assistance.

Topics and example research questions

Research proposals should investigate one of the three research topics and study data proposed below. Applicants are expected to provide details regarding the data they intend to utilize for their research project and how it relates to their chosen topic. The topics in scope are:

1. Excellence and the dimensionality of basic skills

This topic invites research using IEA international assessment data to investigate how basic skills (i.e., reading, mathematics, science, digital, and citizenship skills)[3] are measured and whether the content and cognitive domains defined in assessment frameworks are supported by the empirical structure of student achievement data. Research should explore the dimensionality of the assessed competencies, the relationships between different domains, and the extent to which domain-specific measures provide meaningful information beyond overall achievement scores. Attention may be given to identifying differentiated patterns of student strengths and excellence across European education systems. Projects must include data from multiple EU countries participating in any of the IEA studies. Additional countries may be included if relevant for methodological purposes or as a basis for comparison.

2. Teacher preparedness and professional development across basic skills domains

This topic invites research using IEA international assessment data to investigate teachers' preparedness to teach different basic skills domains, including reading, mathematics, science, digital, and citizenship. Research should explore differences in teachers' perceived preparedness, professional development opportunities and needs across areas of competence, countries, and school contexts. Attention may be given to the relationships between teacher preparedness, initial teacher education, continuing professional development, and instructional practices, with a view to identify areas where additional support may be needed. Projects must

[3] https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/school-education/basic-skills

include data from multiple EU countries participating in any of the IEA studies. Additional countries may be included if relevant for methodological purposes or as a basis for comparison.

3. Learning outcomes and inequalities over time

By combining data across IEA studies and study cycles, potentially complemented by data from other international or national assessments and surveys, this topic seeks to investigate how student achievement and educational inequalities evolve over time across European education systems. Research should explore country-level trends and quasi-cohort patterns, examining changes in average achievement, performance distributions, and gaps between student groups. Attention may be given to the educational, social, and policy-related factors associated with these developments, identifying patterns of improvement or decline and their implications for educational equity. Projects must include data from multiple EU countries participating in any of the IEA studies. Additional countries may be included if relevant for methodological purposes or as a basis for comparison.

Key dates and timeline

The grant period lasts for 12 months, with the applications taking place in a two-stage procedure. The key dates are listed below, while details of the application procedure are explained in the next section.

Monday 02 November 2026	Call opens for expression of interest
Tuesday 01 December 2026 23:59 (CET)	Expression of interest deadline
Friday 15 January 2027	Invitation for proposals issued
Sunday 28 February 2027 23:59 (CET)	Submission deadline for proposals
Friday 16 April 2027	Notification of results
Friday 28 May 2027	Launch meeting with selected Awardees
Summer 2027 (late August/early September assumed)	Training or academy in Hamburg
01 February 2028	Draft results available to the European Commission
No later than Wednesday 01 March 2028	Discussion of the draft research report with either with IEA or with the European Commission (DG EAC)
Friday 28 April 2028	Project completion and submission
Wednesday 01 November 2028	End of embargo

Interim meetings may be scheduled for purposes such as supporting projects, sharing key information, or administrative matters.

The application procedure

Applications are administered via IEA's Grants Platform. Applications are administered in two stages: the expression of interest and the invitation for proposals. Applicants are encouraged to check the eligibility requirements listed above and the FAQs document on IEA's website to ensure they provide all documents necessary for their application to be considered.

Stage one: Expression of interest

During stage one, applicants will need to submit the following online:

- Name
- Affiliation
- Contact details
- Proof of PhD enrolment/PhD certification (PDF, in English)
- CV (PDF, including publication record)
- Supervisor's details (if working with a supervisor)
- CV of any additional researchers (PDF, including publication record)
- Informative research title
- Research summary (maximum 500 words) including:
    - Relevance for EU education policy and Erasmus+ countries
    - Contribution to what is already known and addressing research gaps
    - Research questions and hypotheses
    - Analytical approaches
- **Stage one closing date: 01 December 2026, 23:59 (CET)**

All submissions made under stage one will be screened by a review panel made up of IEA and DG EAC experts. The highest quality proposals, demonstrating exceptional scientific quality and policy relevance, will be invited to the second stage of the application process.

Stage two: Invitation for proposals

During stage two, applicants will be asked to submit the following to supplement their stage one submission:

- **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 quality 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, 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.

Applicants will also be asked to disclose any use of artificial intelligence (AI) in the drafting of their proposals. For guidance on what is deemed appropriate AI use under the auspices of the call, please consult the FAQs document on IEA's website. Undisclosed or inappropriate use of AI may result in an application being rejected.

The deadline for stage two will be 28 February 2027 at 23:59 (CET). Successful applicants will be notified of the outcome of the assessment procedure no later than Friday 16 April 2027.

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

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

Scoring criteria

Submissions for the first stage of the application process will be reviewed by IEA and DG EAC, with each organization responsible for a respective aspect of assessment. Eligibility is scored on a binary two-point scale, while policy relevance is scored on a 1-5 scale, with higher scores indicating stronger performance.

Stage one: Expression of interest review

Eligibility verification

All applications will be screened for eligibility, ensuring all documentation as stated in this call document is present and that the applicant meets the eligibility criteria as stated in this call document.

Scoring Guide:

0. Ineligible: applicant does not meet the eligibility requirements, or required documentation is not present or insufficient.
1. Eligible: all criteria are satisfied and all appropriate documentation is provided.

Policy relevance

Assessment of the relevance and importance of the proposed research questions in supporting the focus areas of the EEA[4] and investigating the topics listed in the call; clarity and credibility of the project's policy relevance within the EEA, including its potential contribution to evidence-informed EU education policy; and how intended findings can inform strategies in pursuit of Union of Skills[5] policies such as the Action Plan on Basic Skills or STEM Education Strategic Plan[6].

Scoring Guide:

1. Very weak: little or no relevance to EU education policy, geographic focus outside of EU Member States.
2. Weak: partially clear but insufficiently justified applicability for informing policy or expected findings offer limited applicability for the EU context.
3. Adequate: well-formulated questions that can provide useful insights to inform EEA policy.
4. Strong: specific relevance for salient policy objectives in the EU, and showing clear potential for advancing understanding of attainment, equity, or other policy goals for EU Member States.
5. Excellent: highly innovative, clearly advancing current knowledge of education policy within the EU, and yielding findings that inform and improve EU education policies and objectives.

Stage two: Invitation for proposals review

Applicants who successfully pass the first review stage will be invited to submit full proposals, as detailed in the application procedure earlier in this document. Independent reviewers from IEA and DG EAC will thereafter evaluate the below additional criteria, with final selections made based upon their reviews and the deliberations of a review panel, also consisting of IEA and DG EAC experts.

Expertise and capacity of the researcher (assessed by IEA)

Assessment of the expertise and experience of the applicant and any named additional researchers; demonstrated ability to conduct advanced analyses of ILSA data; complementarities of skills where multiple team members are involved; and evidence of required qualification(s), skills, and 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.

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[4] https://education.ec.europa.eu/about-eea/the-eea-explained

[5] https://commission.europa.eu/topics/competitiveness/union-skills_en

[6] https://education.ec.europa.eu/focus-topics/stem

5. Excellent: highly qualified team with extensive experience and strong ILSA-related output.

Scientific quality

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 ILSA literature; 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.

Methodological rigor

Assessment of the quality and rigor of the analytical approach; clarity and robustness of selected methodological approach(es) and research design; whether the proposed methods are appropriate, justified and technically sound; how methods support valid and interpretable inferences; and the extent to which the proposal demonstrates understanding of ILSA methodological requirements (e.g., sampling design, weights, plausible values, variance estimation, complex survey design, and handling of missing data).

Scoring Guide:

1. Very weak: clear mismatch between described methods and research questions; flawed or unclear research design.
2. Weak: lacks methodological detail, or methods are inappropriate for the analysis of ILSA data.
3. Adequate: broadly appropriate design with acceptable methodological reasoning.
4. Strong: well-justified analytical strategy showing solid understanding of quantitative methods relevant to ILSA data.
5. Excellent: rigorous, fully justified approach with high methodological sophistication specific to ILSA data.

Feasibility and use of data

Assessment of whether the selected IEA dataset(s) are appropriate for addressing the proposed research questions; the realism and coherence of the proposed data analysis; clarity of outputs and deliverables; and overall viability of completing the project within the grant period.

Scoring Guide:

1. Very weak: unclear connection between data and research questions, lacks detail; chosen datasets do not contain the populations, variables, or other data relevant for research questions.

2. Weak: insufficient or limited justification for dataset choice, possibly unfeasible objectives to be met within the parameters of the project.
3. Adequate: feasible plan with acceptable structure but limited detail or precision regarding chosen data.
4. Strong: well-organized, achievable plan with clear alignment between research questions and data chosen for basis of investigation.
5. Excellent: highly feasible and detailed, with choice of data fully integrated with objectives and research questions to produce reliable results.

To be considered eligible at each stage, proposals must meet **both** of the following conditions:

1. **Minimum score of 3** in *each* individual criterion;
2. **Minimum total score of 19** across all criteria (out of a maximum of 26).

Terms and conditions

Successful applicants will be required to sign a grant agreement and a confidentiality agreement. They may choose whether the grant agreement is signed between IEA and the applicant, or between IEA and the applicant's university/institution. The grant reward will then be transferred to either the Awardee or their institution, depending on which agreement the applicant has opted for.

The intellectual property regarding the final report will remain entirely in the hands of the applicant. However, IEA and DG EAC will have the right to freely use their report and its results in their own work. By signing their grant agreement, researchers also adhere to a six-month embargo (ending **01 November 2028)** regarding the publishing of their report.

IEA will not financially compensate participants in the application stage of this call. The only funding IEA will issue is the grant payment itself to successful Awardees.

While IEA understands the value of feedback, this call is subject to a high number of submissions and as such the association unfortunately cannot provide individual feedback on every application received.

How IEA will support Awardees

Applicants who are successful and secure a grant via this call will receive the following support as they complete their research projects:

- Payment of a financial grant totalling EUR 20,000, made in three instalments over the course of the grant and embargo period.
- Policy relevance coaching from DG EAC specialists at the start of the grant period;
- Intermediate meetings to support project progress;
- An offer to attend training at the IERI academy with enrolment fees waived.

Responsibilities of Awardees

Awardees under the auspices of this grant are expected to meet key deadlines within the grant period, attend meetings and complete all work as stated in their successful application. Specifically, the expectations are to:

- Work on an original comparative research project, potentially aiming for an open-source publication;
- Create 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 the report should be **50 pages**, excluding references and annexes;
- Adhere to deadlines as specified in this call and in the final Grant Agreement signed with IEA upon accepting the grant offer;
- Attend meetings (online or in person) as required for the proper execution of their respective research projects. Matters such as travel expenses, visas, or medical insurance are the responsibility of Awardees themselves;
- Adhere to the standards of the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity[7];
- Adhere to the standards of the Living Guidelines on the Responsible use of Generative AI in Research[8].

Further questions and contact details

Matters such as applicants' eligibility, the use of AI, and administrative questions not covered in this document are explained further in an FAQs document available on IEA's website. For applicants with further questions, you can contact RPGrant@iea.nl and submit your question there. IEA will aim to respond within two working days.

IEA would like to thank all those who submit applications for the Research & Policy Grant for Early Career Researchers. We wish you the best of luck!

[7] european-code-of-conduct-for-research-integrity_horizon_en.pdf

[8] https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/document/download/2b6cf7e5-36ac-41cb-aab5-0d32050143dc_en?filename=ec_rtd_ai-guidelines.pdf