

Call for AAU Excellence 2026

– a two-year research talent programme for early career researchers

As a part of Aalborg University's strategic aim to promote excellent research, early career researchers at AAU are now invited to send an application to the research talent programme *AAU Excellence* with a phase 1 deadline on the 13th of June at 12 pm. This call will explain the content of the programme, the evaluation criteria, financing, and the assessment process including timeline.

1. Background and Purpose

The *AAU Excellence* programme was announced in mid-2024 with an open call. The first group of participants were enrolled into the programme on the 1st of January 2025. The purpose of the programme is to enhance the academic qualifications of early career researchers. AAU Excellence seek to raise the bar for excellent research at AAU, hence giving early career researchers an opportunity to develop their research competencies and mature their research ideas into groundbreaking and original research and prepare them to apply and ultimately secure prestigious research career grants.

The programme aims to develop the participants' competencies within areas like:

- Maturing groundbreaking and original research ideas
- Research skills and profile
- Communication and networking
- Grant application
- Research leadership

Through the programme the participants will work on enhancing an independent research profile, including:

- Publishing original research in internationally recognized journals and/or proceedings
- Establishing international scientific networks and creating national and international awareness and collaboration
- Enhancing research leadership skills
- Securing external funding

2. Content

The *AAU Excellence* programme focuses on career development of a select group of the best and brightest of AAU's early career researchers. Each year AAU selects eight new participants for the programme – two from each faculty. Participants are enrolled into the programme for a period of two years. Within this time the participants will complete a specialised curriculum of activities put together by the programme director and the scientific board of *AAU Excellence*, which consists of international top professors across all four AAU faculties.

The programme's activities are defined within four key areas:

- Maturing research ideas

The programme aims to support the participants in forming a strong and independent research profile and developing and maturing original research ideas. To this end the participants are given a participant's grant to finance relevant activities aimed at realising their individual research visions as well as mentoring to support their development.

- Mentoring

To support participants in their development the programme offers several types of mentoring. Participants are asked to suggest an appropriate senior mentor from AAU. Furthermore, all participants are offered additional mentoring through a group of accomplished mid-career mentors from AAU as well as external mentoring from other academic or non-academic institutions. The focus of the mentors is the career development of the participants.

- Courses

The programme offers a specialised curriculum focusing on strengthening the skills of the participants as well as broadening their perspectives on the academic ecosystems. All activities chosen with the aim to help the participants succeed within all the different areas of academic life. The curriculum offers introductions to the prestigious grants, research leadership, scientific grant writing, communication training etc.

- Networking and exclusive events

Participants are urged to and supported in the efforts to establish and strengthen their national and international research networks both within their own field of research and the interdisciplinary. The programme offers unique opportunities to train networking skills through special events with prominent guests. The participants are invited to exclusive and inspirational meet ups with international top researchers, university management and representatives from scientific foundations etc.

The key areas have been selected to ensure a broad, professionally enriching programme which provides participants with the right prerequisites to further their individual research career and to give the best conditions for realising their research visions, further their career trajectory and support them in securing prestigious career grants. For further information on current activities in the programme (in 2025) check out the AAU Excellence LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/company/aau-excellence/.

Participants and their departments are expected to commit to the programme. To maximize the potential benefits of the programme it is expected that the participants allocate their research time¹ to participating in the programme and working on their research vision. Within this time frame participants will have the opportunity to focus on the aims of the programme – maturing their research ideas, establishing and strengthening their network, developing an independent research profile and participating in programme activities. The mandatory programme activities are estimated to take up one day per month on average. Most of the programme activities will be conducted physically in Aalborg and some are online. All activities are organized to ensure that participants from other locations can join physically.

¹ Research time is estimated at around 40 percent of normal working hours.

3. Funding and Terms and Conditions

To pursue the aims of the programme each participant receives a grant of 250,000 DKK per year, resulting in a total grant of 500,000 DKK over the two-year duration of the programme. The grant is specifically for (but not exclusively limited to) the following purposes:

- Research leadership courses
- Other competency development
- Research travels, network activities, and conference activities
- Student assistants to support the participant's research activities
- Equipment, data packages, and laboratory access

The departments are committed to co-finance the programme in-kind, thus making the participants' research hours fully dedicated to the programme.

The awarded grant must be spent on activities related to the participation in the programme. The grant is evenly divided between the two years and funds cannot be transferred from one year to another.

4. Who can apply?

Applicants must be employed at AAU. Acceptance into the programme is possible for all researchers who have acquired a PhD after the 13th of June 2020, thereby having a PhD age of no more than 5 years when they apply for the programme by the 13th of June 2025. It is the date as it appears from the signature on the PhD diploma, which is used for calculation of the PhD age. In case of parental or sick leave, etc., the time period will be prolonged. External applicants can apply for the programme if they have a signed employment contract with AAU by the time they are enrolled into the programme.

If the grant holder leaves AAU during the grant period, the grant will not follow the grant holder. The remaining grant will be returned to the grant provider.

5. Assessment of Applications

All interested applicants for *AAU Excellence* are invited to prepare a phase 1 application. For the preparation of the application, the application form (see appendix 2) is used. For a full timeline for the application process see appendix 1.

The assessment is a two-step process:

Phase 1:

- Expression of interest
A short application consisting of 500 words on scientific visions and 300 words on career potential and 200 words on host environment – see further information below.
- CV and short publication list
CV and publication combined must be max. 2 pages. Highlight up to the three most important research publications.
- List of potential external reviewers
The applicant must list five potential external scientific peer reviewers within the applicant's own research field. The suggested reviewers must be on minimum associate professor level and cannot be AAU employed. The applicant must be aware of any conflict of interest from the possible reviewers. At least three of the five suggested reviewers must be employed at a university outside Denmark.

All phase 1 applications will be assessed by an internal selection committee of representatives from the scientific board of *AAU Excellence* and the vice deans for research from the applicant's own faculty. The 16 most qualified applicants (max 4 from each faculty) are shortlisted to phase 2. All applicants shortlisted will be invited to submit a full application and asked to confirm their interest in submitting a phase 2 application. Further information on phase 2 will be available for those who are selected.

Phase 2:

- Full application
An application consisting of 1500 words on scientific visions and 900 words on career potential and 600 words on host environment – see further information below.
- CV and short publication list
The same as in phase 1.
- Written declaration from Department Head
As an appendix to phase 2 applications the applicant's Head of Department at AAU must prepare a written declaration of support (max 500 words). The declaration must focus on how the applicant's research aligns with the departments current and future plans. The declaration is not a letter of support in terms of the applicant's academic qualifications.

All phase 2 applications will be assessed by two external scientific reviewers within the applicant's field of research. All phase 2 applicants are invited to a 30-minute interview with the scientific board of *AAU Excellence* before the board makes the final selection. Before the interview applicants will receive their external assessments. Eight applicants will be selected for enrolment into the programme – two from each faculty.

Assessment Criteria

The evaluation within each phase will be based on three assessment criteria: Applicant's scientific vision, applicant's career potential and applicant's host environment.

Scientific vision

Scientific vision is assessed based on the applicant's ability to formulate their research ambitions for the next five to ten years. This includes the originality of the proposed research vision, its potential impact, the scientific approach, and its feasibility.

Career potential

Career potential is assessed on the applicant's research skills, scientific achievements, level of independence as a researcher, communication skills, collaborations, international network, and research stays abroad. The applicants are asked to describe how they envision to enhance research skills to become competitive for a tenure position at an international research institution. The applicants are asked to specify their motivation for applying to the programme and how they see themselves benefit from participating. These considerations will be taken into account in the assessment.

Host environment

The applicant's host environment and research environment are assessed on the potential for support and guidance from more established scientists, suitability for the applicant's career development, commitment and scientific competences and facilities.

Important Dates for Phase 1 applicants

- The 13th of June 2025 at 12 pm: Deadline for phase 1 applications.
- The 9th of July 2025: Applicants will be notified if they are shortlisted for phase 2.

Contact Details

Questions regarding the call can be addressed to Programme Director Henrik Halkier or Strategic Advisor Lasse Panny Pedersen through: aa-excellence@aa.dk