

Call for AAU Excellence 2027

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

As part of Aalborg University's strategic commitment to promoting excellent research, early career researchers at AAU are invited to apply to the research talent programme *AAU Excellence*, with a Phase 1 deadline of 12 June 2026 at 2.00 pm (CET).

The call is open, and all eligible early career researchers at AAU are encouraged to apply. The programme selects participants through a highly competitive process based on a rigorous assessment of scientific vision, career potential and host environment.

This call explains the content of the programme, the evaluation criteria, financing, and the assessment process, including the timeline.

1. Background and Purpose

AAU launched the Excellence programme in mid-2024 and enrolled the first cohort on 1 January 2025, followed by a second cohort on 1 January 2026.

The purpose of the programme is to strategically develop a highly selected group of early career researchers towards becoming leading researchers and research leaders. AAU Excellence seeks to raise the bar for excellent research at AAU by providing early career researchers with the opportunity to mature their research ideas into original research, and to prepare for competition for prestigious national and international research career grants.

To achieve this, the programme focuses on strengthening the participants' capacities within key areas such as:

- Maturing original research ideas
- Strengthening research skills and profile
- Developing communication and networking competences
- Grant application development
- Research leadership

Through the programme, participants are expected to develop an increasingly independent research profile, including:

- Publishing original research in internationally recognised peer-reviewed journals and/or conference 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 the career development of a select group of AAU's early career researchers. Each year, AAU admits eight new participants to the programme—two from each of the university's four faculties¹. Participants enrol in the programme for a period of two years.

During this period, participants complete a structured programme of activities developed by the programme director and the Scientific Board of AAU Excellence, which consists of top international professors representing all four AAU faculties.

The programme's activities are organised in four key areas:

- Maturing research ideas
The programme supports participants in developing a strong and independent research profile by advancing and refining original research ideas. It also provides participants with targeted funding and mentoring to support the realisation of their individual research visions.
- Mentoring
To support participants' career development, the programme offers several forms of structured mentoring. Participants nominate one senior mentor from AAU and may also receive further mentoring from experienced mid-career researchers and external mentors from academic or non-academic institutions.
- Courses
The programme offers a course portfolio designed to strengthen key academic competences and broaden participants' understanding of the academic ecosystem. Course activities focus on areas such as prestigious research funding, research leadership, scientific grant writing and research communication.
- Networking and exclusive events
Participants are supported in establishing and strengthening national and international research networks within and beyond their own research fields. The programme offers targeted networking opportunities, including exclusive events with distinguished international researchers, university leadership, and representatives from scientific foundations.

The key areas are designed to ensure a broad and professionally enriching programme providing participants with strong prerequisites for furthering their individual research careers, realising their research visions and strengthening their prospects of securing prestigious career grants. For further information on current activities in the programme check out the *AAU Excellence* LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/company/aau-excellence/.

Participants and their departments commit to the programme. To maximise the benefits of participation, participants must be able to allocate dedicated research time to programme activities and to work on their individual research vision and their departments must support their employees through their participation in the programme.

Within this framework, participants focus on maturing research ideas, strengthening national and international networks, developing an independent research profile, and engaging actively in programme activities. Mandatory programme activities are estimated to require one day per month on average.

Most programme activities take place in person in Aalborg, while other activities are online. All activities are organised to enable participants based outside Aalborg to attend in person.

¹ The Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH), The Faculty of Engineering and Science (ENGINEERING), The Faculty of Medicine (SUND) and The Technical Faculty of IT and Design (TECH)

3. Funding, Terms and Conditions

Each participant receives a grant of DKK 250,000 per year, amounting to a total of DKK 500,000 over the two-year programme period. The grant is awarded to the participant and placed at their disposal to support individual development within the framework of the talent programme in accordance with AAU financial regulations, including the realisation of their scientific and career vision. Apart from reserving funds for the research leadership course, participants may use the grant for activities they consider relevant for their own development, including, for example, research and networking activities (such as research travel and conference participation), specific competency development, student assistance, and access to equipment or facilities.

Departments are committed to co-financing the programme in kind by ensuring salary and the allocation of dedicated research time for the participants. The grant cannot be used to finance the participant's own salary.

4. Who can apply?

Applicants must hold an AAU employment contract from 1 January 2027 through 31 December 2028. Researchers who obtained their PhD after 12 June 2021 and have a PhD age of no more than five years at the time of application are eligible to apply. Extensions apply in cases of parental leave, sick leave, or similar circumstances.

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.

5. Assessment of Applications

The programme assesses applications in two phases.

Phase 1 – Expression of Interest

All applicants must submit:

- A short application consisting of a scientific vision (max 500 words), a description of career potential (max 300 words) and host environment (max 200 words)
- A short CV with selected publications. CV and publication combined must be max. 2 pages. Highlight up to the three most important research publications.
- A 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 hold positions at associate professor level or higher and cannot be AAU-employed. Applicants must ensure that the suggested reviewers have no conflicts of interest. At least three of the five suggested reviewers must be employed at a university outside Denmark.

Based on this material, a selection committee shortlists applicants for phase 2. All applicants shortlisted will be invited to submit a full application and asked to confirm their interest in moving forward to phase 2.

Phase 2 – Full Application and Interview

Shortlisted applicants are invited to submit:

- A full application consisting of a scientific vision (max 1500 words), a description of career potential (max 900 words) and host environment (max 600 words)
- A CV and short publication list. The same as in phase 1.
- A written declaration from their Head of Department. 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 and how the

department will support the applicant's development. The declaration is not merely intended to be a letter of support in terms of the applicant's academic qualifications.

All phase 2 applications are assessed by two external scientific peer reviewers, and the phase 2 applicants are invited to an interview with the scientific committee of AAU Excellence. Before the interview applicants will receive their external assessments.

The final choice is based on scientific quality, future potential and institutional support.

6. Assessment Criteria

Applications are in both phase 1 and 2 assessed based on demonstrated and projected potential for future excellence. The assessment focuses on the applicant's scientific vision, career potential and host environment, with particular emphasis on the quality and ambition of the scientific vision.

Scientific vision

The assessment of scientific vision is the primary assessment criterion and considers the applicant's ability to formulate a clear, ambitious and coherent research agenda for the next five to ten years. Emphasis is placed on originality, scientific ambition, potential impact, robustness of the scientific approach and feasibility.

Career potential

The assessment of career potential considers research skills, scientific achievements, level of independence and the ability to position oneself strategically within the research field. Emphasis is placed on international experience, collaborations and the potential to develop towards an internationally competitive research career and future research leadership. Applicants are expected to specify their motivation for applying to the programme and how they expect to benefit from participating. These considerations will be taken into account in the assessment.

Host environment

The assessment of the host environment considers the capacity to support the applicant's scientific vision and career development, including access to relevant competences and facilities, commitment from the environment and opportunities for guidance from established researchers.

Important Dates for Phase 1 applicants

- 12 June 2026 at 2.00 pm (CET): Deadline for phase 1 applications.
- 30 June 2026: Applicants will be notified if they are shortlisted for phase 2.

Contact Details

Please direct questions about the call to Programme Director Henrik Halkier or Strategic Advisor Lasse Panny Pedersen through: aa-excellence@aa.dk