

Invitation to Apply to ESA Phi-Lab United Kingdom

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Thank you for your interest in ESA Phi-Lab United Kingdom.

Space-based studies and technology developments bring benefits to Earth in the form of services and top-class science. This makes the space industrial sector of high strategic and economic value. At the same time leading edge research brings benefit to space, and indeed to Earth and society with disruptive innovation.

As part of the Phi-LabNET, one of the Components of the Innovate Element in the ScaleUp Programme, ESA is rolling out a dynamic network of Phi-Labs in ESA Member States.

Phi-Labs do bridge the gap between early-stage research and commercialisation. They ensure that the research is not just innovative but closely serve ESA or industry needs. Phi-Labs are geared for supporting the maturation of technologies that enable commercial applications. The focus is given to technologies with the potential to disrupt existing markets or even create new markets. The support provided is intended to boost the delivery of innovation, thereby reducing the time to market. Beyond the creation of new technical capabilities, the activity shall output an assessment of the market disruption potential and a roadmap to commercialisation.

In the United Kingdom, the Science and Technology Facilities Council is responsible for managing ESA Phi-Lab United Kingdom.

ESA Phi-Lab United Kingdom offers a comprehensive package of support to research teams selected, including access to and use of Phi-Lab ecosystem, workspace, innovation seed funding, equipment and test facilities, technical support, business coaching, and IP support.

The focus of ESA Phi-Lab United Kingdom is **space-enabled sustainability technologies**. It will fund and support activities across three pillars – environmental sustainability, space sustainability, and space resilience – as described in more detail below.

ESA Phi-Lab United Kingdom hereby invites you to submit your application to enter the Phi-Lab United Kingdom programme. All research activity proposals shall be rooted in novel research, as well as targeted and shaped for potential commercial applications.

This document provides an introduction to the application and evaluation process and contains references to the templates that should be used when applying.

Please contact ESA Phi-Lab United Kingdom for any further questions.

Yours sincerely,
Antonio Costa
ESA Phi-Lab UK Operations Manager

Introduction

The purpose of this Open Call for ESA Phi-Lab United Kingdom is to inform about the opportunity for research projects to become supported by the ESA Phi-Lab United Kingdom and to provide the material and guidance needed to apply for support.

The deadline for applications to be considered for the next Tender Evaluation Board (TEB) is **15 May 2026**. More information on key dates and the application process is available at esaphilab.org.uk.

Research Focus at ESA Phi-Lab United Kingdom

The ESA Phi-Lab United Kingdom will be funding and supporting research projects that deliver disruptive innovation and demonstrate high commercial potential across the following pillars:

Pillar 1: Environmental Sustainability

This pillar covers Earth observation technologies and services that leverage space-based capabilities to improve environmental sustainability and address global challenges such as climate change mitigation, extreme weather forecasting, disaster response, humanitarian crisis, and sustainable resource management. These examples represent some of the capability areas under this pillar and are not intended to be a fully exhaustive list.

Pillar 2: Space Sustainability

This pillar covers activities that ensure space remains safe, clean, and usable for all actors over the long term. Examples of capability areas to be addressed include preventing debris creation, removing debris, end-of-life management, responsible operations and design, in-orbit servicing and manufacturing, and sustainable in-space manufacturing (e.g., reducing debris risk, reducing launches). These examples represent some of the capability areas under this pillar and are not intended to be a fully exhaustive list.

Pillar 3: Space Resilience

This pillar focuses on strengthening the ability of space systems to operate safely, reliably, and continuously. This includes capabilities such as Space Domain Awareness (e.g., tracking, conjunction prediction, anomaly detection), development of dual-use technologies, tools for detecting and managing harmful or negligent behaviours in orbit, and approaches to monitoring and mitigating space weather impacts. These examples represent some of the capability areas under this pillar and are not intended to be a fully exhaustive list.

Who can apply?

The research project proposal must be submitted by a legal entity or a consortium of legal entities based in the UK. The team applying shall have the skills necessary to achieve the proposed activity, including insight in the industrial and market ecosystem that the technology will impact.

For applicants not based in the UK, the following requirements apply:

- Legal entities not based in the UK must be established in an ESA Member State, Associate Member, or European Cooperating State.
- These entities can apply only as subcontractors.
- Applicants must demonstrate that the research activity benefits both the Phi-Lab and the UK.
- At least 70% of the total project costs must be allocated to UK-based legal entities.

The proposed research shall enable market disruptive application(s), with potential high socio-economic impact; it must include a clear plan of research activities, with defined roles for scientific or technical contributors. The proposed work shall be based on solid research-driven evidence of its feasibility. The proposal shall also outline a credible road to commercialisation for the applications that the technology (to be matured by the research project) enables and make a preliminary assessment of potential market disruption.

The idea shall have a valid space connection. This is:

- The exploitation of space technology, use of knowledge from the space domain, or utilisation of space systems and space-based services in non-space domains (spin-off).
- Or the provision of products or services for the space sector, addressing any part of the space value chain (from components to entirely new space systems or related facilities and services) and any related activity (from concept definition to operation), possibly using non-space technology (spin-in).

Some further criteria apply:

- The project shall be relevant for the specific focus of competence of the Phi-Lab and the specific topics as defined in the previous Section (Research Focus).
- The project shall be focused on maturing (a) technology(ies), through a research-led process, towards the performance levels required by the target application(s).
- An Economic Operator may participate in no more than two (2) applications per call in total, whether as a lead applicant (prime contractor) or as a subcontractor. An Economic Operator may act as lead applicant (prime contractor) in only one (1) application.
- The applicants must fulfil all the requirements below:
 - When acting in collaboration with other national or foreign entities, the applicant will be the sole contractor and will be fully responsible for managing the funding.
 - To declare that the work proposed under the submitted ESA Phi-Lab United Kingdom project is not being funded through other means (e.g., ESA R&D activities, ESA Business Incubation, ESA Business Applications, European Commission etc).
 - To observe the remaining requirements stated in this document.

How to apply

Please make sure you have received the following documents, which are part of the Open Call documentation:

- This Open Call Letter
- Research Proposal Application Template including:
 - Cover Letter and Requirement Checklists
 - Executive Summary
 - R&D and Potential Impact Proposal
 - Activity and Management Proposal
- Draft Research Contract
- Draft Award Voucher

Make sure to fill in all required sections in the application templates and pay particular attention to the following:

- Instructions inside the documents (**highlighted in blue in each template**) shall be followed in order to fulfil all pre-conditions of the Open Call and for the application to be accepted.
- Please read the Draft Research Contract carefully. The Cover Letter must include a clear, explicit and unambiguous statement declaring that the applicant has read, understood and accepted the terms and conditions contained in the contractual documentation (this is part of the Cover Letter template). Modifications or amendments to the Contract may only be

done in exceptional cases. Please contact the local ESA Phi-Lab United Kingdom Manager for guidance.

- Make sure the Cover Letter and the Requirement Checklists are signed by the legal representative of the Legal Entity.
- Support in ESA Phi-Lab United Kingdom may be requested for a maximum of 24 months.

Please submit the application documents in electronic form (pdf, maximum three files) to the following e-mail address: esaphilab@stfc.ac.uk with subject "ESA Phi-Lab United Kingdom Open Call".

After you submit your application, you will receive an email acknowledging receipt within 3 business days. If you do not receive this acknowledgement, please reach out to confirm whether your email and attachments were successfully received.

Any questions related to submission of proposals should be sent to the same e-mail address: esaphilab@stfc.ac.uk.

Budget and additional benefits

The total available budget for the implementation of the Call is €1.7M. The total available ESA Innovation Seed Fund per winning research project ranges from a minimum of €200,000 to a maximum of €225,000. The ESA Phi-Lab United Kingdom aims to fund two (2) research projects at the next tender evaluation board.

The ESA Innovation Seed Funding shall represent a percentage ranging from 50% to 100% of the total allowable cost of the activity, subject to compliance with the following provisions:

- Work carried out by SMEs may be funded up to a maximum level of up to 80% of the total allowable cost of the activity.
- Total combined work carried out by universities and research institutions involved as subcontractors in a consortium and justifying no further commercial interest in the product or service may be funded to a maximum level of 100% if this funding does not exceed 30% of the total allowable cost of the activity; Should work need to be (sub)contracted for more than 30% of the total eligible costs, such additional share shall be co-funded up to a maximum of 50% of the total eligible costs; Universities and research institutions claiming to have any commercial interest in the future exploitation of the final product or service shall be required to demonstrate this interest. In such a case, the funding level for SME or non-SME shall apply.
- Work carried out by economic operators that are not SMEs nor universities and research institutions may be funded up to a maximum level of 50% of the total allowable cost of the activity.

Moreover, the ESA Phi-Lab United Kingdom will provide additional support as an in-kind contribution, up to a maximum value of €150,000. This support includes the following elements:

- Access to technical facilities and labs
- Access to office workspace environment (included by default and you will have the option to have your research project based at either the Harwell Campus or the Sci-Tech Daresbury Campus)
- Business coaching (included by default)
- Research, scientific and engineering support
- IP support
- Access to workshop and events

Applicants must provide clear evidence in their proposal describing how their project will benefit from the support, expertise, and facilities offered by the ESA Phi-Lab United Kingdom. Early engagement

with the Phi-Lab partners during the application stage is strongly encouraged to verify that the requested support is appropriate and can be provided.

Eligible costs

In order to be eligible, all project costs must be:

- Necessary to the execution of the project.
- Incurred by the beneficiary and recorded in its accounts.
- Incurred during the contract term.
- Indicated in the cost planning in the proposal.
- Without VAT, interest owned, or duties.

Expenses incurred in the preparation and dispatch of the proposal will not be reimbursed. The project may consider the following direct costs:

- Staff costs
- Subcontracting costs
- Access to data sources or intellectual property
- Materials, equipment, and facilities
- Travelling, subsistence, and accommodation costs

The following costs incurred are eligible:

- Train and plane costs in Economy Class, up to €700 travelling in Europe and up to €1,600 travelling outside Europe
- Taxi costs
- Car rental and/or car mileage
- Accommodation up to €250 per person per night
- Subsistence costs up to €100 per person per day

Information regarding all Travelling, Subsistence and Accommodation costs must be provided in the Mid-Term (where applicable) and Final Reports and shall include the objectives of the occasion (event, meeting, etc.), contacts made and results.

- Business development and promotion (data sheets, flyers, trade shows etc.). Attendance to trade shows (or similar) should be agreed in advance with the local ESA Phi-Lab Manager.
- Other – costs not included in the above categories but deemed critical to the execution of the project should be agreed in advance with the local ESA Phi-Lab United Kingdom Manager.

The evaluation procedure

The evaluation of all received applications is managed locally by ESA Phi-Lab United Kingdom and follows common ESA Phi-Lab procedures.

Once a published submission deadline has passed, ESA Phi-Lab United Kingdom first assesses the formal aspects of applications received before the submission deadline. If a formal non-compliance of formal nature is found, the applicant may be asked to address this in an updated proposal within 48 hours. If the proposal is found non-admissible, the applicant will be informed, and the reason will be explained. In such a case an applicant is eligible to submit a revised proposal at a later date.

If the application is compliant with the formal requirements, applicants will be invited to hold a presentation to the ESA Phi-Lab United Kingdom evaluation board. The evaluation will typically take place a few weeks after the submission deadline. The evaluation board consists of representatives of ESA Phi-Lab United Kingdom, ESA, UKSA and other experts. There will also be an opportunity for the evaluation board to ask questions to the applicant.

The application and the presentation will be marked against the criteria in Table 1, taking weighting factors into account.

Criteria	Sub criteria
Background and Experience (25%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Experience Team composition b) Partnerships and Support Entities c) Vision
Research and Technology developments (30%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Relevance for the Call b) Suitability of technology for targeted application c) Understanding of and leveraging on the State of the Art (SoA), novelty of the proposed research d) Depth and significance of technical innovation e) Maturity of the technology and feasibility for target application(s) f) Clarity and relevance of the research objectives
Commercial Opportunities and Potential Socio-Economic Impact (25%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Potential applications, problems addressed and target markets b) Hurdles, risks and roadmap to commercialisation c) Potential for market disruption, industrial transformation and socio-economic impact d) IPR strategy
Activity and Management proposal (20%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Clarity and relevance of work to achieve objectives b) Feasibility: access to facility and data / availability of personnel c) Milestones, cost planning, and work breakdown structure d) Approach to align the R&D with the market needs e) Management of the activity f) Fit with the Phi-Lab g) No double funding

Table 1: ESA Phi-Lab United Kingdom evaluation criteria and weighting factors.

Proposals with a score below 40 (out of 100) for any one of the 4 evaluation criteria will be disqualified.

All applicants will be notified in writing about the outcome of the evaluation. The applicant may require, within 10 calendar days from the receipt of the notification, an oral debriefing explaining the reason why the application was successful or not.

The ESA Phi-Lab United Kingdom has been formally registered as a subsidy scheme under control number [SC11306](#). As a result, all applications must also meet the relevant subsidy control criteria.

ESA Phi-Lab United Kingdom will enter into contract negotiations with successful applicants, taking the comments of the evaluation board into account. ESA Phi-Lab United Kingdom has the right *not* to place a contract if, after three months after the notification to a successful applicant, no contract still has been signed, and this is because of a reason for which the applicant can be held accountable.

Furthermore, we kindly ask you to pay attention to the following:

- Please note that applications will be treated as confidential. However, the applicant's idea may through this application fall into the public domain (e.g., if local laws require so). Therefore, we strongly recommend that the applicant discusses the protection of his/her idea with a dedicated expert in this field prior to application, and – if relevant – takes appropriate steps to protect the idea (e.g., by applying for a patent).

- As far as allowed by law, any title held by the applicant to his/her idea shall remain vested in him/her. An application to ESA Phi-Lab United Kingdom will not result in the acquisition of any title whatsoever to the idea. However, ESA retains a right to use the Intellectual Property in specific cases. Please read the detailed conditions described under the section “Use of Intellectual Property Rights” in the Draft Contract.
- No expenses incurred in either stage of the application procedure will be reimbursed to the applicant by ESA Phi-Lab United Kingdom, ESA and/or any third party.
- This Open Call does not impose any obligation upon ESA Phi-Lab United Kingdom to enter into negotiations with any applicant.