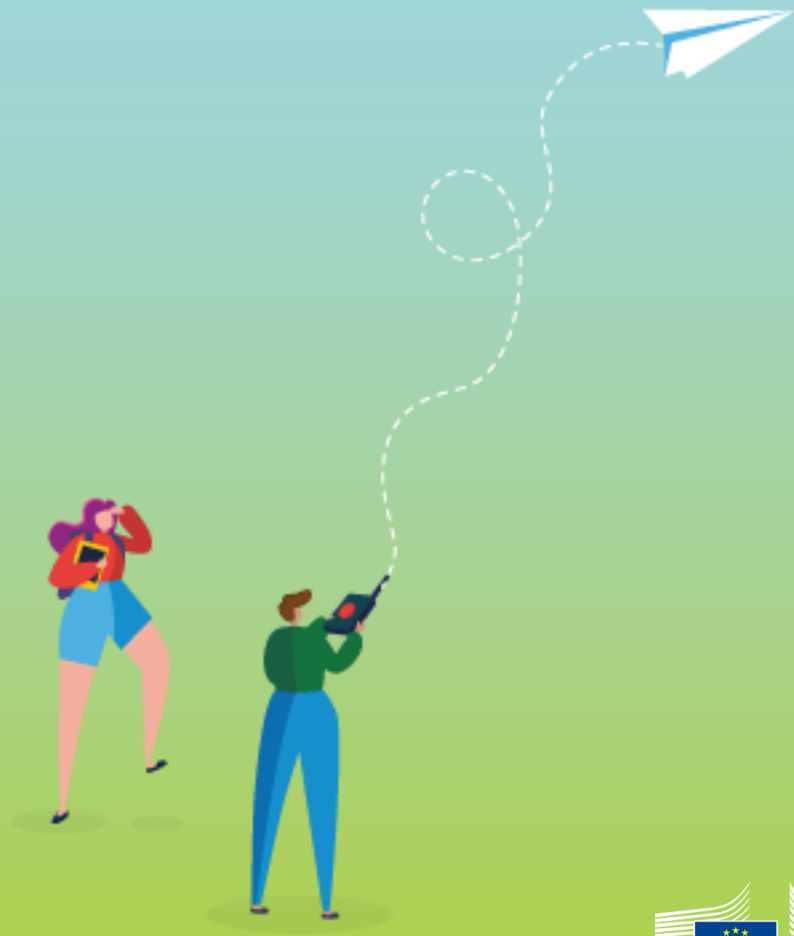
European Startup and Scaleup Hubs pilot call

- European Startup and Scaleup Hubs pilot call – policy context

- European Startup and Scaleup Hubs pilot call – practical details



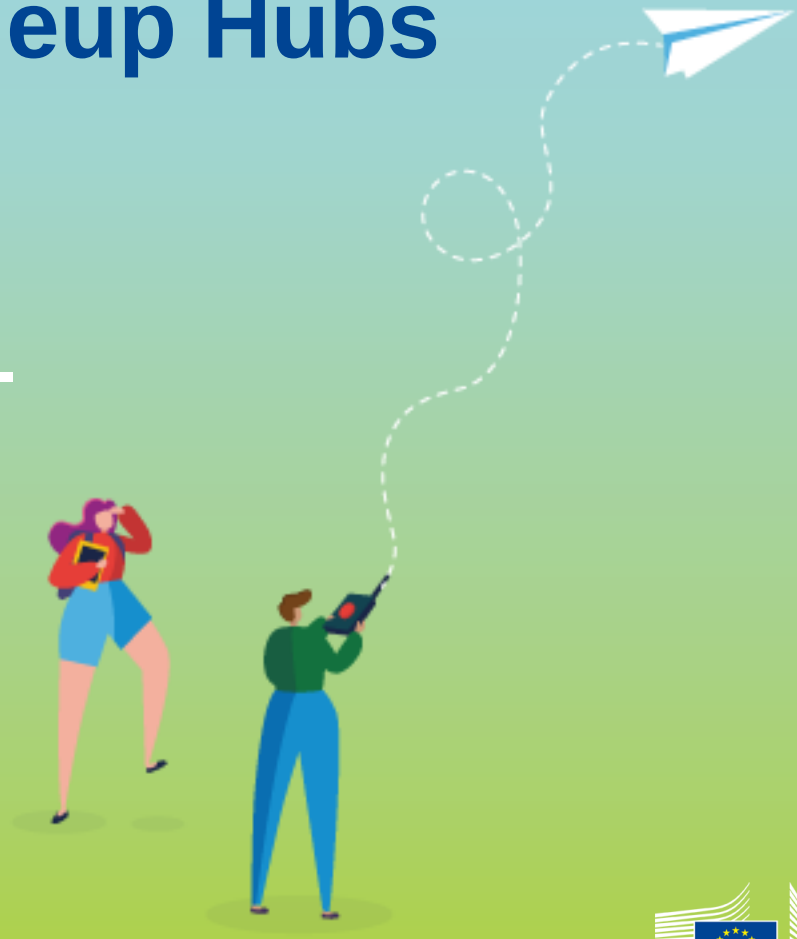
European Commission

ESSH (HORIZON-EIE-2026-02-CONNECT-01) – basic info

Type of Action	Co-Fund (50% EU funding)
Call opening date	11 December 2025
Call closing date	10 March 2026
Total Indicative EU budget	EUR 20 M
Expected EU contribution	EUR 20 M
Expected grants to be signed	1
Expected project duration	2 years

European Startup and Scaleup Hubs (ESSH) pilot call

– policy context –

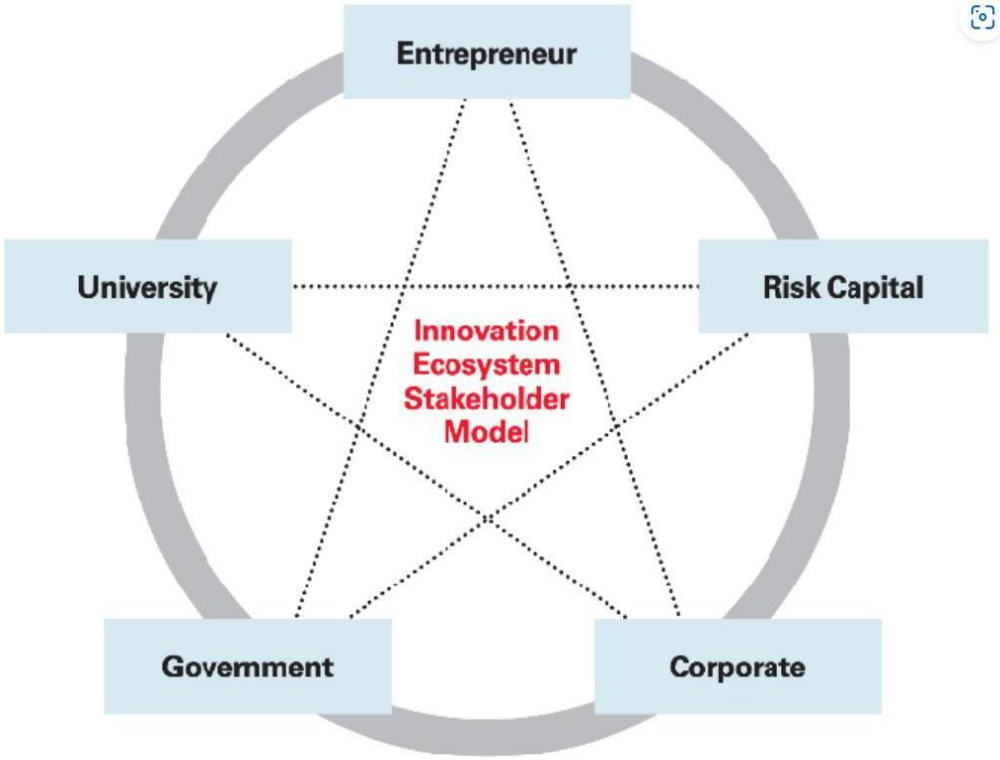


European Commission

Policy objectives of ESSH

Overall objectives:

- Reinforce and interconnect 10 to 18 leading and emerging startup and scaleup hubs rooted in strong research ecosystems
- Emulate the creation and growth of European deep tech startups through increased access to essential resources: infrastructures, venture capital, talents, mentors, collaboration opportunities, etc.
- Create bridges to supporting schemes in Europe: European Innovation Council (EIC), EIC Scaling Club, Enterprise Europe Network, etc.



Budden & Murray, 2019

Policy rational

Develop innovation capabilities

- Compared to the US, Europe had a relatively static economy over the past 25 years leading to a significant productivity gap
- Entrepreneurs didn’t seize the opportunities of the digital revolution
- To remain competitive in the global economy Europe will need to do better with upcoming innovation waves

Support startups and innovation

- As emphasised by the literature on innovation and economic growth new entrants especially startups play an important role in commercialising disruptive technologies
- But startups often fail to successfully growth in Europe

Policy rational

Building on innovation hubs

- Startup flourish mainly in hubs providing the appropriate resources to develop, while favouring similar locations for expansion
  - Research capabilities
  - Funding and finance
  - Support systems
  - Talent pools
  - Accessible markets
- The EU has numerous innovation clusters, but they are less developed and generate less value than those of the US and China

Improve competitiveness in complex technologies

- Publication and patenting activities show that European innovation hubs are less interconnected than their US counterparts

- Europe's lack of interconnectivity is a competitive disadvantage for developing complex technologies

Practicalities: What is a startup hub

Strong research capabilities: Cutting edge infrastructures and excellent research teams

A talent pool: relevant graduate programmes, management and entrepreneurship specific trainings, etc

Dedicated startup and scaleup support: Incubator, accelerator, mentoring, etc

Network density: entrepreneurs, investors, mentors, academic and corporate researchers, etc

Professional services: legal and regulatory advice, real estate, accounting, etc

Practicalities

What should a successful project aim for?

- Consolidation of dynamic entrepreneurial ecosystems
- Deep tech R&I collaborations generating new spinoff ventures
- Successful scaling-up of startup companies
- Capacity building in advanced technologies

Activities encouraged by the scope

- Provide access to relevant infrastructures and facilities
- Support connections: pitch days, meet-ups, hackathons, startup week-ends, etc
- Ensure access to funding opportunities and services: EIC, EEN, EIT-KICs, local service providers etc
- Knowledge transfer between hubs

Practicalities: Selection criteria and KPIs

Selection criteria

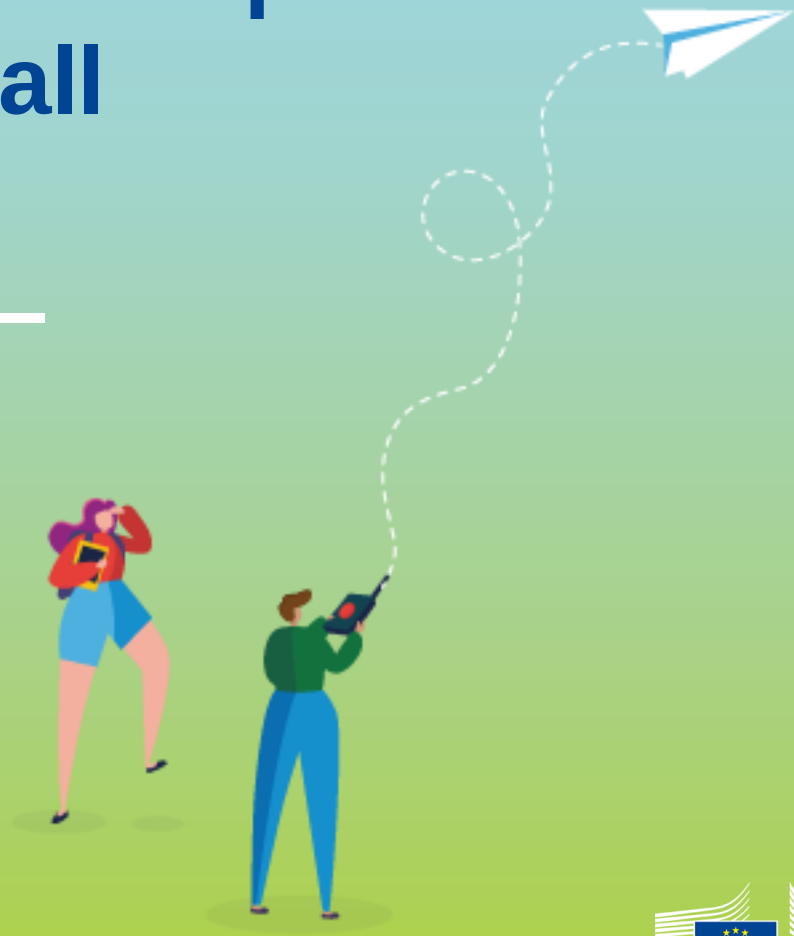
- Track record in startup and scaleup support
- Research excellence and infrastructures
- Cross-border collaboration capabilities
- Deep tech innovation potential

KPIs

- Startups supported
  Min: 100
- Cross-boarder support
  Min: 50
- Startups attracting VC funding
  Min: 50%

European Startup and Scaleup Hubs (ESSH) pilot call

– practical details –



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ESSH – eligibility conditions

Consortium and regional requirements:

- A hub must be represented by a **single legal entity** or **several legal entities** representing the relevant actors of the innovation ecosystem supporting startups
- The consortium should consist of a **network of at least 10 hubs** from at least 10 different Member States or Associated Countries.
- For Member States and Associated Countries with an overall **population not exceeding 35 million**, participation is limited to a **single hub** in the given consortium.
- For Member States and Associated Countries with an **overall population exceeding 35 million**, the participation is limited to two hubs in the given consortium.
- At least 2 participating hub shall be established in a “**widening country**”.

ESSH – eligibility conditions

Letter of intent

- The consortium must provide a single letter of intent at the moment of submission of the proposal indicating the source of the required 50% of complementary funding (e.g. national and/or regional funding, EU funding, or private investments).

Communication networks

- Subject to restrictions for the protection of European communication networks.

ESSH – expected outcome

- **Accelerate market expansion** for European deep tech startups across EU regions and beyond by fostering collaboration and mutual support among European tech startup ecosystem actors;
- Establish robust, **pan-European alliances of top-tier tech startup and scaleup hubs** embedded in research, technology and higher education ecosystems;
- Enable **cross-border access** to infrastructures, facilities, corporates, investors and talents to deep tech startups and scaleups, including those funded by the European Innovation Council (EIC);
- Enable more European deep tech startups **to succeed scaling into globally competitive companies**;
- **Strengthen less-connected innovation hubs** by integrating them into a Europe-wide collaborative network;
- Mobilise **greater private and public capital** into deep tech ventures across participating innovation hubs

How to apply?

- Applications to be submitted through the Funding & Tenders Portal

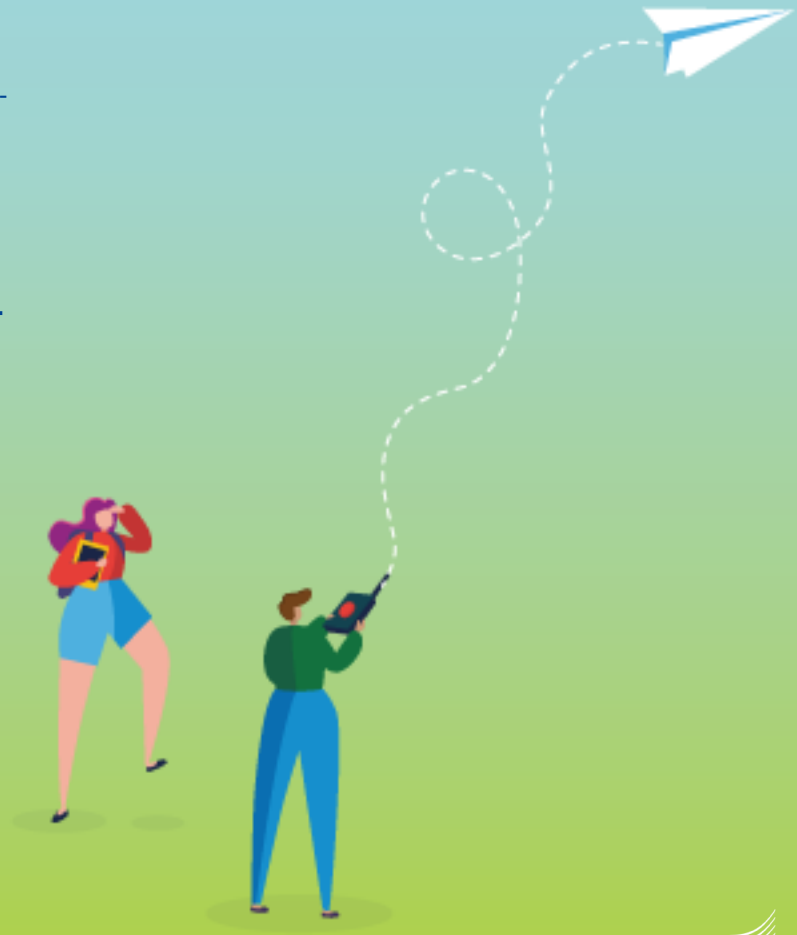
- Applicants should submit:
  - Part A - Forms & budget
  - Part B - Technical info (main proposal – max 70 pages for COFUND)
  - Letter of intent (mandatory – eligibility condition)
  - Financial Support to Third Parties (optional)

- **Call** – European Startup and Scaleup Hubs pilot (HORIZON-EIE-2026-02-CONNECT-01:
  https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/opportunities/topic-details/HORIZON-EIE-2026-02-CONNECT-01?isExactMatch=true&status=31094501,31094502&frameworkProgramme=43108390&programmePart=43121692&order=DESC&pageNumber=1&pageSize=50&sortBy=startDate

Useful links:

- **EIE Work Programme 2026-2027**
  https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/horizon/wp-call/2026-2027/wp-10-european-innovation-ecosystems_horizon-2026-2027_en.pdf

- **ESSH pilot call – Info Session, 11 December 2025**
  - Full PPT -https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/circabc-ewpp/d/d/workspace/SpacesStore/c1dfd296-ccdf-4593-923c-0ca5c223a77a/download
  - Video - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mKrvkR5nHas



Source: EISMEA (2025). *European Startup and Scaleup Hubs Pilot call* [PowerPoint slides]. SlideShare. https://eismea.ec.europa.eu/events/online-info-session-european-startup-and-scaleup-hubs-pilot-call-horizon-eie-2026-02-connect-01-2025-12-11_en

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European Commission