2025/2026 CALL FOR JOINT PHD PROJECTS

KU LEUVEN AND THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE
(FUNDING TO COMMENCE IN 2026)

PURPOSE OF THE SCHEME

Following sought after calls in 2020, 2021 and 2023, KU Leuven and the University of Melbourne (Melbourne) are calling for proposals to establish joint PhD projects. The Graduate Research projects scheme established the KU Leuven—Melbourne joint PhD program, providing opportunities for international research collaboration.

In 2025, KU Leuven and Melbourne are calling for proposals to establish up to ten (10) joint research projects across ten (10) pairs of supervisors. Each of these ten (10) PI pairs will support two (2) joint PhD candidates.

The joint PhD candidates can only be recruited after granting of the projects. They must meet the minimum eligibility requirements to successfully enroll in the relevant PhD courses at both Universities. Candidates participating in the PhD program are enrolled at both institutions, perform their research work under joint supervision, and are judged according to the academic standards of both institutions.

The recruited candidates will join the KU Leuven—Melbourne ICRA, gaining:

- Access to expertise, resources and world-class training at Melbourne and KU Leuven, spending at least 12 months of their candidature at each institution;
- Complimentary skills from their respective hosts that will increase the impact of their research; and
- A global perspective via involvement in the KU Leuven—Melbourne research network.

Upon successful completion of the program, each candidate will be eligible to receive a PhD, recognised by two testamurs, one from Melbourne and one from KU Leuven. Both testamurs will state the joint nature of the award and the name of the partner institution.

This call is open to proposals from **all areas of research.**

ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

The Supervisory team must comprise of *at least* two Principal Investigators (PIs), one from KU Leuven and one from Melbourne. The PIs must have the capacity to serve as principal supervisors for two jointly enrolled PhD candidates.

The University of Melbourne

Melbourne academics must be registered to supervise as per the Graduate Research Training Policy

(MPF1321). Principal supervisors should be employed at Melbourne beyond the envisaged submission date of their PhD candidates (2031). If their employment contract does not extend beyond the candidates' submission date, then alternative arrangements must be in place, by either having:

a) A named co-supervisor employed at Melbourne beyond the envisaged submission date of their PhD candidates (2031); *or*
b) A letter of support from the respective Head of Department/Head of School detailing the arrangements in place to ensure continuity of supervision.

For more information, including forms for supervisor registration, please consult the information for supervisors section on the Graduate Research Hub.

Honorary employees whose primary academic affiliation is the University of Melbourne are eligible to lead an application as a PI if they are a registered Principal Supervisor at Melbourne, and either:

a) Their primary employer has entered into a written agreement for this call, using the provided approval form to fund the Melbourne cash component of the collaborative activity ($10,000 AUD); *or*
b) They participate at their own expense if they are otherwise unaffiliated (for example, they hold an emeritus position).

Melbourne academics must not have outstanding Progress Reports or Final Reports from any other University of Melbourne Researcher Development Schemes or ICRA scheme.

KU Leuven

KU Leuven academics must meet the requirements of the *General regulations and conditions Internal Funds*. The KU Leuven PI and main applicant will also become the 'promoter' of the doctorate at KU Leuven. KU Leuven co-PIs can become co-promoters of one or both PhDs.

Applications that do not satisfy these criteria will **not be eligible.**

FUNDING, DURATION AND RESIDENCE

Up to a total of ten (10) supervisory team applications will be funded, with each application supporting two (2) joint PhD candidates. One of these two (2) candidates will have Melbourne as their Home Institution, and the other will have KU Leuven as their Home Institution. Joint PhD projects should be designed to be completed in 4 years of candidature.

The Home Institution is where the candidate spends most of their research time and is likely to commence and conclude their degree. The Host Institution is where the candidate spends the remainder of their candidature as part of a research stay. The timeline is flexible depending on the needs of the project, but all candidates participating in the program must spend at least 12 months at each institution during their candidature.

Under this joint PhD arrangement, all candidates (Home and Host) are offered a Graduate Research Scholarship for the time they are at Melbourne*, and KU Leuven offers a scholarship when the candidates (Home and Host) are physically located at KU Leuven**.

The individual PhD candidate shall reside in the research team of the funding institution at the time funding is provided by that institution. Both institutions will undertake, for compliance purposes

(social security, tax and other legislation), the necessary efforts so that the periods of research at each institution will correspond to the periods of appointment at that institution. Each institution funds the candidates according to their respective scholarship terms and conditions.

*A Melbourne Graduate Research Scholarship is paid while the candidate is located in Melbourne for up to 2.5 years when Melbourne is the Home Institution or up to 2 years when KU Leuven is the Home Institution.

**KU Leuven funds 4 years in total per paired projects; years to be divided over both PhD candidates.

Below is a suggested PhD project timeline. The timeline is flexible depending on the needs of the project, but all candidates participating in the program must spend at least 12 months at each University during their candidature.

Melbourne Home Institution
12 months Melbourne
12-18 months KU Leuven (Max 24 months)
12-18 months Melbourne

KU Leuven Home Institution
12 months KU Leuven
12-18 months Melbourne (Max 24 months)
12-18 months KU Leuven

Summary of funding for each project:

University of Melbourne	**KU Leuven**
Tax-free scholarship (stipend) via a Graduate Research Scholarship	Tax-free scholarship (social security and partial health insurance included)
Tuition fee waiver	Tuition fee waiver
A $10,000 lump sum* to support Melbourne Home candidates and Melbourne PIs for relevant activities, including**: • Candidate travel • PI travel • Workshop costs or virtual collaboration expenses • Graduate recruitment	Bench-fee for the KU Leuven PI for relevant activities: €3720/year
Insurance: Overseas Student Health Cover (OSHC) Single Membership for international candidates who require a student visa to study in Australia, when in Australia, and travel insurance for Melbourne Home candidates while on Study Away	Insurance: Third Party Liability Insurance Occupational Accidents Insurance Travel Insurance for KU Leuven Home candidates while on secondment
Relocation allowance for candidates to travel or relocate to Melbourne: $2000 AUD for candidates relocating or travelling from States or Territories other than Victoria or $3000 AUD for candidates relocating or travelling from outside Australia.	To be drawn from Bench-fee: - Relocation allowance for candidates to travel or relocate to KU Leuven

**The lump sum provided by Melbourne is pooled and allocated to the Academic Lead of the joint PhD program. The Academic Lead is responsible for overseeing the funds, with the administrative support of the SASS ICRA team for the uses described.* ***Please note that ineligible costs include: directly incurred staff (e.g. Research Assistants), replacement research/teaching costs, directly allocated costs including applicants' time, indirect costs/estates costs, travel costs beyond mobility to the partner institution, publication costs, equipment, consumable costs, additional scholarships, conference attendance, bench fees, registration or enrolment fees, tuition fees, and honoraria.*	

Melbourne and KU Leuven reserve the right to determine the eligibility of expenses.

PROJECT STRUCTURE AND PROPOSALS

Before preparing a proposal, please note the following about the structure of the program's joint PhD projects:

- Up to 10 proposals, each including projects for two PhD candidates, will be supported. The proposals must be led by at least one PI/Principal Supervisor from each institution.
- Each pair of PIs should submit one proposal outlining two PhD projects, one for a Melbourne Home candidate and one for a KU Leuven Home candidate. The projects can be on a similar research topic or theme, but there should not be any interdependence between these two projects. The candidates cannot rely on each other's results or completed thesis work to progress in their candidature.
- Joint PhD projects should be designed to be completed in a maximum of 4 years candidature.
- If the application involves a Principal Investigator from the Faculty of Arts at Melbourne, the proposed project must first obtain Faculty pre-approval prior to submission to the University. As part of this process, the required approval documentation must include details of how the candidate will meet the Faculty of Arts PhD coursework requirements.

The online application form requests:

- The details of the PIs/research groups involved, including CVs and links to each PI's website.
- Abstracts for both PhD projects, which will be used for recruitment if the proposals are successful.
- An overview of the PhD projects, providing:
  - Descriptions and workplans for both projects.
  - A supervision plan, highlighting why the project requires time to be spent at the partner institution and benefits of doing so.
  - A GANTT chart showing the division of time to be spent by each candidate at both institutions.
  - A formal statement that the PIs will make sufficient preparations for the PhD candidate to be able to finalise the doctoral dissertation within a maximum period of 4 years.
- A summary of the collaboration value and potential impact, noting:
  - The extent of the planned collaboration between the PIs beyond joint supervision.

    - How the proposal could lead to the development of a larger network of researchers across both institutions.
    - A plan for leveraging future external funding, if applicable.
    - The balance of gender and career stages of involved investigators.
- Equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) priorities
- Completion of an ethics and privacy checklist
- Research Project Activity Type
- Fields of Research (FoR) codes, Socio-Economic Objective (SEO) codes and Discipline codes
- Review of Export controls
- All Melbourne applicants must attach endorsement from the respective Head of School/Department and Associate Dean (Graduate Research) [ADGR sign off is not required for MDHS applicants].

It is recommended that applications are written in lay terms for reviewers to better understand the project's potential impact and its anticipated outcomes.

SELECTION CRITERIA

The proposals will be evaluated based on the below selection criteria and ranked by both Melbourne and the Council for International Collaborative projects (RISP) at KU Leuven. Both rankings will be compared and the common best ranked proposals will be selected after mutual agreement by both institutions. Up to ten of the top-ranking research groups (equal to 20 PhD projects) will be selected.

The following selection criteria apply:

- **Project design and rationale** – What is the scientific merit of the joint PhD project? Does it involve a high level of qualitative research? How clearly presented and justified is the basis for, and design of, the joint PhD project? What are the anticipated benefits of involving joint PhD researchers in the collaboration? What is the benefit of the candidate spending a minimum of 12 months at each institution?
- **Collaborator complementarity** – What is the added value of a new collaboration or building on an existing research relationship? How does the collaboration combine mutual areas of interest and strength? What is the quality and extent of the planned collaboration?
- **Quality of supervision** – How will the PIs work together effectively in jointly supervising their shared PhD candidates? What are the beneficial learning outcomes and experiences for the joint PhD candidates? Have the PIs accounted for any challenges that may arise when supervising a joint PhD candidate?
- **Potential impact** – What is the level of originality and innovation in the research proposal? To what extent does the research proposal plan to address significant challenges and what is the anticipated benefit to local or international communities?
- **Capacity for expanded collaboration** – What is the extent of the planned collaboration between the PIs beyond joint supervision? How well does the proposal plan to leverage external funding? To what extent are future collaborations made possible as a result of the proposed activities? How could this project seed the development of a larger network of researchers?

EQUITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Additional colleagues (including other partners in Australia, Belgium, or internationally) are not eligible to apply as PIs, although they can participate in the co-supervision of joint PhD candidates. However, involvement of shared external partners that benefit the project, for example through translation support or providing internship opportunities, is encouraged.

PIs cannot submit more than one proposal (for two joint PhD candidates) as part of this call but can co-supervise other projects.

Adherence to respective equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) policies are a core feature of this program to ensure that all participants can do their best work, thrive and succeed. Applicant teams should consider how they can take meaningful steps in their future collaborations to foster an environment that values, supports and respects a diverse range of views, knowledge and experiences.

Applicants should consider EDI as it applies to gender, indigenous peoples, disabilities, career stages and sectors. Applications that do not satisfy these criteria will **not be eligible.**

REPORTING AND OTHER CONDITIONS

All candidates in the program must submit their thesis for examination within four years of commencement.

Melbourne

Melbourne recipients will be required to provide regular updates on project progress during the candidature of their joint PhD candidates. These updates will be requested annually by the International Collaborative Research Academy (ICRA) Academic Lead. Recipients who fail to participate in regular reporting mechanisms for this ICRA may be found ineligible for participation in future Researcher Development or ICRA Schemes.

KU Leuven

If the Graduate Researchers have not completed their doctoral defence within four years of commencement, the Graduate Researcher's KU Leuven supervisor must submit a plan to KU Leuven outlining how they intend to support the doctorate's prompt completion.

Where the doctoral defense is completed within four years, it will be sufficient to submit the confirmation of the defense to KU Leuven's DOC (Research Coordination Office) with a reference to the defense date.

KU Leuven's current reporting guidelines can be found at:
https://www.kuleuven.be/english/research/associatienet/doc/if/IF-information-for-promoters

SUBMISSION PROCEDURE

Step 1: PIs from Melbourne and KU Leuven must submit a single, jointly prepared application via the University of Melbourne's SmartyGrants Portal by Friday 6 February 2026 5.00 pm AEDT (Melbourne)/ 7.00 am CEST (Brussels). Melbourne will send all submitted applications as PDF to KU Leuven after the deadline. KU Leuven administration will attach each PDF to the respective registered application.

Step 2: KU Leuven PIs must register their application via the link in the KU Leuven guidelines in GeDOCumenteerd by Friday 6 February 2026 5.00 pm AEDT (Melbourne) / 7.00 am CEST (Brussels).

Applications should be written in English and for an audience proficient, but not expert, in the field.

All Melbourne projects must ensure that the Head of Department/School and Associate Dean (Graduate Research) endorsement is attached to the application using the approval forms provided on the Researcher Development Schemes website. Melbourne applicants who hold an Honorary position must also complete the Honorary declaration form.

If the application involves a Principal Investigator from the Faculty of Arts at Melbourne, the proposed project must first obtain Faculty pre-approval prior to submission to the University. As part of this process, the required approval documentation must include details of how the candidate will meet the Faculty of Arts PhD coursework requirements.

The link to the application form is: https://ricunimelb.smartygrants.com.au/KULeuven-Melb-2026

Key Dates

Call opens for proposal applications	Monday 24 November 2025
Deadline for project proposal applications	Friday 6 February 2026
Outcome notifications	End of April 2026
Candidates to commence	October 2026 – March 2027

PIs must successfully recruit two candidates to commence by 31 March 2027. If the PIs do not meet this deadline, the scholarship and mobility funding will be recalled for use in a future call.

CONTACT DETAILS

Submission and Melbourne contact details:

The Researcher Development Schemes team
Research, Innovation & Commercialisation (RIC)
The University of Melbourne
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KU Leuven contact details:

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