Metaverse and Heritage Routes as Innovation Approaches for Networking, Capacity Building and Interregional Investments

Metaheritage Funding Guide

Funded by the European Union

Disclaimer

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Table of Abbreviations and Acronyms

DG AGRI: Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development: Agriculture and Rural Development

DG COMP: Directorate-General for Competition: Competition - European Commission

DG CONNECT: Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology: Communications Networks, Content and Technology

DG EAC: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture: Education, Youth, Sport and Culture

DG ECFIN: Directorate-General for Economic and Financial Affairs: Economic and Financial Affairs

DG EMPL: Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion**:** Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion

DG GROW: Directorate General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs: Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs

DG REFORM: Directorate-General for Structural Reform Support: Funding - Reforms and Investments - European Commission

DG REGIO: Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy**:** Regional and Urban Policy - European Commission

DG RTD: Commission's Directorate-General for Research and Innovation: Research and Innovation

EACEA: European Education and Culture Executive Agency: EACEA - European Education and Culture Executive Agency

EDIHs: European Digital Innovation Hubs: European Digital Innovation Hubs | Shaping Europe's digital future

EEA countries: European Economic Area: Member States EU/EEA | IND

EIB: European Investment Bank: Homepage | European Investment Bank

EIF: European Investment Fund: Homepage | EIF | European Investment Fund

EISMEA: European Innovation Council and SMEs Executive Agency: EISMEA - European Innovation Council and SMEs Executive Agency (EISMEA)

FSTP: Financial Support for Third Parties or cascade funding: Cascade Funding Calls / Financial Support for Third Parties (FSTP) - IT How To - Funding Tenders Opportunities

HaDEA: European Health and Digital Executive Agency: European Health and Digital Executive Agency - European Health and Digital Executive Agency (HaDEA)

REA: European Research Executive Agency: European Research Executive Agency - European Research Executive Agency

S3: Smart Specialisation Strategies, place-based policy frameworks through which regions identify and prioritise areas with strong innovation and economic potential. Inforegio - About S3 Smart Specialisation

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Introduction

The digital transformation of cultural heritage presents unprecedented opportunities for innovation, preservation, accessibility and economic development. From immersive technologies and artificial intelligence to digital twins and data spaces, the intersection between culture and technology is reshaping how heritage is created, managed and experienced.

However, navigating the funding landscape that supports these initiatives can be complex. European programmes, national and regional schemes, financial instruments, private investment, philanthropy and alternative financing mechanisms may offer different pathways to support project development and sustainability.

The **MetaHeritage Funding Guide** has been developed to provide a structured overview of financing opportunities relevant to organisations operating at the intersection of digital innovation and cultural heritage. It aims to serve as a practical orientation tool for stakeholders seeking to develop, test, scale or internationalise their projects.

This guide is conceived as a living document and will be periodically updated to reflect changes in funding programmes and emerging financial instruments. This is particularly relevant in the current context, as the EU institutions are preparing and negotiating the framework for the post-2027 programming period, which may lead to significant changes in the overall architecture and strategic orientation of several programmes, especially in the field of research and innovation.

Purpose of the Guide

The MetaHeritage Funding Guide aims to:

- Provide a clear and structured overview of the main financing families relevant to digital cultural heritage, distinguishing between non-repayable grants, public financial instruments, loans and guarantees, private investment, philanthropy, sponsorship and alternative financing.
- Support SMEs, startups, cultural institutions, research organisations and innovation ecosystems working in digital cultural heritage.
- Facilitate strategic alignment between project maturity (TRL), funding type and appropriate financial instruments.
- Reduce fragmentation and improve accessibility to funding information.
- Encourage interregional collaboration and cross-sector innovation within the cultural heritage ecosystem.
- Support the scaling and sustainability of digital heritage initiatives through grants, loans, blended finance and investment opportunities.

Who Is This Guide For?

The MetaHeritage Funding Guide is designed for organisations and stakeholders operating at the intersection of cultural heritage and digital innovation, including:

Cultural and Heritage Institutions
Museums, archives, libraries, cultural foundations, heritage sites and public authorities seeking to digitise collections, develop immersive experiences, implement data-driven solutions or enhance audience engagement.

SMEs and Startups
Small and medium-sized enterprises developing technological solutions for the cultural and creative sectors, including AI applications, XR/VR experiences, digital twins, heritage platforms, data services or preservation technologies.

Research and Academic Institutions
Universities, research centres and laboratories working on applied research, technological development or innovation in digital heritage.

Innovation Ecosystems and Clusters
Digital Innovation Hubs, regional clusters, innovation agencies and ecosystem builders supporting interregional collaboration and smart specialisation strategies.

Investors and Intermediaries
Impact investors, venture capital funds, cultural foundations and financial intermediaries interested in understanding the funding landscape and investment pathways in the digital heritage sector.

Funding Landscape Overview

1. EU Programmes under direct management

EU programmes under direct management operate within a broader strategic policy framework shaped by initiatives such as the European Green Deal, the Digital Decade, the EU Industrial Strategy, the European Data Strategy, and the New European Bauhaus. These frameworks influence programme priorities in areas such as sustainability, digital transformation, industrial competitiveness, and cultural innovation.

Research, innovation & networking

Horizon Europe

Level: European
Managing authority: European Commission (primarily DG Research & Innovation – DG RTD), implemented through Executive Agencies such as REA, EISMEA and others depending on the programme component.
Type of support: Grant
Objectives
Horizon Europe supports research and innovation in AI, data spaces, XR/VR, digital twins, cybersecurity, cultural transformation and digital and green transition.
Horizon Europe is organised into **three pillars**
Pillar I – Excellent Science
Pillar II – Global Challenges & European Industrial Competitiveness. Within this pillar, Horizon Europe is organised into thematic "Clusters", which group related societal challenges and industrial sectors. Each Cluster defines multiannual priorities and annual calls for proposals addressing specific policy objectives.
Particularly relevant clusters include:

- Cluster 2: Culture, Creativity and Inclusive Society
- Cluster 4: Digital, Industry and Space
- EU Missions (e.g., Climate Adaptation, Climate-Neutral Cities, etc.)

Pillar III – Innovative Europe
Target beneficiaries: Universities, research centres, SMEs, large enterprises, public authorities, cultural institutions, and other eligible entities (typically participating in international consortia).
Geographical Scope / Eligibility: Open to EU and Associated Countries; third-country participation subject to specific rules.
Funding mechanism

- 100% for Research & Innovation Actions (RIA)
- 70% for Innovation Actions (IA) - (100% for non-profit entities)
- 100% for Coordination & Support Actions (CSA)

Typical project size: Varies depending on the specific call and cluster. Collaborative projects typically range from approximately **€2 million to €20+ million**, depending on scope and ambition.
TRL focus: While TRL ranges are not formally fixed across the programme, actions generally

correspond to:

- RIA: early-stage research and technology development (approximately TRL 1–4/5)
- IA: demonstration, prototyping, and validation (approximately TRL 6–8)

The exact TRL expectations are defined in each specific call.
How to access it: Through competitive calls for proposals published in the EU Funding & Tenders Portal. Projects are typically submitted by international consortia in response to topics defined in the Horizon Europe work programmes.
When to use it:
✓ For collaborative European research and innovation projects
✓ For projects involving AI, digital technologies and advanced experimentation
✓ For initiatives linking culture, heritage, tourism, sustainability and innovation
✓ For medium- and large-scale projects with strong innovation potential
Link to official source: Horizon Europe - Research and innovation - European Commission

European Innovation Council (EIC)

Level: European
Managing authority: European Commission (DG RTD and EISMEA under Horizon Europe Pillar III – Innovative Europe)
Type of support: Grants, blended finance and equity investment, depending on the instrument
Objectives
The European Innovation Council's mission is to identify, **support and scale breakthrough** and **disruptive innovations** with strong market potential, with a particular focus on high-risk, high-impact deep tech.
Main instruments

- **EIC Pathfinder:** Supports early-stage breakthrough research and novel technologies (TRL 1–4).
- **EIC Transition:** Supports technology maturation and validation, alongside business and market readiness (approximately TRL 4–6). Proposals must build on results from eligible previously funded projects, as specified in the relevant call.
- **EIC Accelerator:** Supports scaling of individual companies with grants and equity for activities ranging from validation to market deployment (TRL 6–9).
- **EIC STEP Scale up:** Provides large-scale equity investments to startups, SMEs, spin-offs and eligible small mid-caps developing breakthrough innovations in strategic technology areas. It is intended for companies seeking major private co-investment rounds to accelerate international growth and market expansion.

The **EIC Fund** is the investment arm of the EIC and provides the equity component of the EIC Accelerator and EIC STEP Scale Up. In this guide, it is treated in more detail under EU Financial Instruments.
Target beneficiaries: Researchers, universities, research organisations, startups, SMEs and eligible small mid-caps, depending on the instrument. Pathfinder generally supports research consortia, while Accelerator and STEP Scale Up primarily target individual companies.
Geographical Scope / Eligibility: Primarily for EU and Associated Country entities.
Funding mechanism: Funding depends on the instrument:

- EIC Pathfinder and EIC Transition: Non-repayable grants.
- EIC Accelerator: Grants, blended finance (combining a grant with an investment component), or investment-only support, subject to the relevant call conditions.
- EIC STEP Scale Up: Equity investment through the EIC Fund.

Business Acceleration Services, including coaching, mentoring and investor matchmaking, complement the financial support.
Applications are assessed through competitive evaluation processes. Funding conditions depend on the instrument and the applicable call; investment components are subject to due diligence and investment decisions.
TRL focus: Covers the full innovation chain (TRL 1–9), depending on the instrument
How to access it: Through competitive calls for proposals published in the EU Funding & Tenders Portal. Depending on the instrument, applications may be submitted by individual companies (e.g. EIC Accelerator) or by consortia (e.g. EIC Pathfinder).
When to use it:
✓ For breakthrough or disruptive technologies with strong market potential
✓ For deep tech ventures needing support beyond traditional grant schemes
✓ For highly scalable companies developing breakthrough technologies in strategic areas and seeking major equity investment and private co-investment
✓ For breakthrough and high-risk technological innovations with the potential to create or significantly disrupt markets
✓ For heritage-tech, tourism-tech or cultural applications only where the underlying technology is highly innovative, defensible & capable of substantial international scale-up
Link to official source: European Innovation Council - European Innovation Council

Skills and Capacity Building

Erasmus+

Level: European
Managing authority: European Commission (DG EAC), implemented by:
EACEA (European Education and Culture Executive Agency) for centralised actions
National Agencies in each participating country for decentralised actions
Type of support: Grant (lump sums and other simplified funding models, especially for cooperation partnerships and large-scale alliances).
Objectives
Erasmus+ aims to support education, training, youth and sport across Europe. It supports learning mobility, cooperation and innovation across sectors to develop skills, employability and social inclusion.
Target beneficiaries: Vocational Education and Training (VET) providers, universities and higher education institutions, SMEs and industry organisations (in partnerships), public authorities, NGOs and civil society organisations and sectoral associations.
Geographical Scope / Eligibility: Open to Programme Countries; Partner Countries may participate depending on the action.
Funding mechanism: Funding is provided through competitive calls under the Erasmus+ Work Programme.
Many cooperation actions use lump-sum funding models, especially for partnerships and alliances. Budgets vary significantly depending on the action (from small cooperation

projects to multi-million-euro sectoral alliances).
TRL focus: Not TRL-based (focused on skills, capacity building, education system innovation, sectoral cooperation rather than on technological R&D or market deployment)
How to access it: Through competitive calls published under the Erasmus+ Work Programme. Depending on the action, applications are submitted either through National Agencies (for decentralised actions) or through the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) for centralised actions. Detailed guidance and application forms are available on the Erasmus+ application portal.
When to use it:
✓ For skills development, training and capacity building
✓ For cooperation projects linking education, culture, tourism and industry
✓ For upskilling the workforce in digital and green competences
✓ For projects focused on cultural mediation, heritage interpretation or sectoral cooperation rather than technological R&D
Link to official source: https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/

Deployment & Digital Infrastructure

Digital Europe Programme (DEP)

Level: European
Managing authority: European Commission (primarily DG CONNECT), implemented through EISMEA and HaDEA (for specific actions such as EDIHs).
Type of support: Grants and other forms of support, with funding models and co-financing conditions defined in each call.
Objectives
The Digital Europe Programme aims to accelerate the **wider deployment and adoption of advanced digital technologies** across the EU and to strengthen Europe's **digital capacities and strategic autonomy**. As part of this objective, the programme supports a reinforced network of **European Digital Innovation Hubs (EDIHs)**, which act as regional "one-stop shops" helping SMEs and public sector organisations accelerate their digital transformation. EDIHs provide access to technological expertise, testing and experimentation facilities ("test before invest"), training, and a range of innovation support services.
Target beneficiaries: Public authorities, EDIHs, SMEs and mid-caps, research and technology centres, Universities (especially for advanced digital skills), Industry consortia.
Geographical Scope / Eligibility: Projects are usually transnational and they are open to EU Member States and DEP-Associated Countries; third-country participation is limited and subject to strategic conditions.
Funding mechanism: Funding conditions, grant forms and co-financing rates vary substantially between actions and are defined in each call. Depending on the topic, support may take the form of lump-sum grants or other grant models, and applicants may be required to provide co-financing
TRL focus: Not TRL-based. Focused on deployment, integration and scaling of mature digital technologies.
How to access it: Through competitive calls published in the EU Funding & Tenders Portal, under the Digital Europe work programmes.

When to use it:
✓ For deploying mature digital technologies rather than carrying out research
✓ For projects related to AI, cybersecurity, cloud, data infrastructures or advanced digital skills
✓ For supporting SME and public sector digital transformation through EDIHs
✓ For initiatives connected to digital heritage, data spaces, tourism technology uptake or the Common European Data Space for Cultural Heritage
Link to official source: [The Digital Europe Programme | Shaping Europe's digital future]

Connecting Europe Facility (CEF Digital)

Level: European
Managing authority: European Commission (DG CONNECT), implemented by the HaDEA.
Type of support: Grant (co-financing for digital connectivity infrastructure deployment)
Objectives:
CEF Digital aims to support the deployment of secure, high-capacity and **resilient digital connectivity infrastructure** across Europe.
The programme strengthens European digital sovereignty and territorial cohesion by improving connectivity in rural, remote and cross-border areas.
Target beneficiaries: Public authorities, telecom operators, infrastructure consortia, utilities, Cross-border infrastructure consortia.
Geographical Scope / Eligibility: Participation is primarily limited to entities established in EU Member States. In certain cases, associated or neighbouring countries may participate, particularly in cross-border infrastructure projects, subject to specific agreements and eligibility conditions.
Funding mechanism: CEF Digital uses a **co-financing grant model**.

- Funding rates vary depending on the action (studies vs deployment works).
- Infrastructure deployment projects typically receive up to 50% co-financing.
- Projects are generally large-scale and infrastructure-intensive.

TRL focus: Not TRL-based. CEF Digital supports large-scale deployment of mature digital infrastructure (post-R&D, market-ready technologies).
How to access it: Through competitive calls published in the [EU Funding & Tenders Portal], under the Connecting Europe Facility Digital work programmes.
When to use it:
✓ For large-scale deployment of digital connectivity infrastructure
✓ For projects related to 5G corridors, smart communities or backbone networks
✓ For improving digital connectivity in rural, remote or cross-border areas
✓ For connectivity infrastructure that may indirectly enable digital heritage services, immersive tourism experiences or smart destinations
Link to official source: [Connecting Europe Facility - CEF Digital | Shaping Europe's digital future]

Market Uptake, SMEs & Sectoral Ecosystems

Single Market Programme (SMP)

Level: European
Managing authority: European Commission, primarily under DG GROW with implementation delegated in part to executive agencies such as EISMEA, depending on the action.
Type of support: Grant (mainly co-financed actions; funding model varies depending on the strand and call)
Objectives
The Single Market Programme (2021–2027) aims **to ensure the effective functioning of the EU Single Market** and to **strengthen the competitiveness and sustainability** of European enterprises.
The programme consolidates and builds upon previous instruments such as COSME and other market-related initiatives.
Target beneficiaries: SMEs (primary focus in the competitiveness strand), clusters and cluster organisations, business support organisations, chambers of commerce, enterprise Europe Network (EEN) partners, industry associations, public authorities involved in Single Market governance, standardisation bodies and consumer organisations
Projects are typically implemented through transnational consortia.
Geographical Scope / Eligibility: Eligible applicants must be established in EU Member States, and legal entities in countries associated to the Single Market Programme (through specific agreements). Third-country participation is generally limited and subject to the specific call conditions. The programme primarily supports actors established within the EU Single Market framework.
Funding mechanism: Funding is allocated through competitive calls under annual or multiannual work programmes.

- Co-financing grant model
- Funding rate typically ranges between 50% and 75%, depending on the action
- Some coordination or support actions may receive higher funding rates

The programme strongly emphasises practical implementation, market integration and SME support rather than research. The funding is highly call-dependent.
Projects may range from smaller coordination actions (hundreds of thousands of euros) to multi-million-euro ecosystem and cluster development projects.
TRL focus: Not formally TRL-based. The programme primarily supports SME competitiveness, market access, internationalisation, business support services, ecosystem cooperation and the practical uptake of solutions. Technology maturity requirements depend on the specific action.
How to access it: Through competitive calls published in the [EU Funding & Tenders Portal](), under the relevant Single Market Programme work programmes.
When to use it:
✓ For projects aimed at strengthening SME competitiveness and market access
✓ For cluster cooperation, industrial ecosystem development and value chain integration
✓ For initiatives in tourism, cultural and creative industries, especially where the focus is on business growth, cross-border cooperation or smart and sustainable market uptake
Link to official source: [Overview - European Commission]()

Creative Europe

Level: European
Managing authority: European Commission (DG EAC), implemented by the EACEA
Type of support: Grant
Objectives
Creative Europe supports the cultural and creative sectors across Europe by promoting cross-border cooperation, cultural diversity, competitiveness, innovation and the circulation of European cultural works.
The programme is structured into three strands:

- **Culture**: Supports transnational cooperation projects, networks, platforms and literary translation initiatives aimed at strengthening the sector's capacity to operate internationally.
- **MEDIA**: Supports the European audiovisual industry, including development, production, distribution and promotion of European films and audiovisual works
- **Cross-sectoral strand**: Promotes cross-sectoral cooperation, innovation, media literacy and policy development. It also supports the Creative Europe Desks network, which provides guidance and information to potential applicants across participating countries.

Target beneficiaries: Cultural organisations, creative SMEs, cultural networks, public authorities, NGO and cultural institutions
Geographical Scope / Eligibility: Projects are typically implemented through international partnerships. Eligible applicants must be established in EU Member States or in countries participating in the Creative Europe Programme. Organisations from other third countries may participate under specific conditions, depending on the action.
Funding mechanism: Funding is allocated through competitive calls under annual work programmes. Co-financing rates vary depending on the action:

- Small-scale cooperation projects: up to 80%
- Medium-scale cooperation projects: up to 70%
- Large-scale cooperation projects: up to 60%

Typical project size ranges from approximately €200,000 to €2 million or more, depending on the category.
TRL focus: Not TRL-based. Creative Europe supports cultural cooperation, organisational innovation, audience engagement, cultural content production and circulation, digital experimentation within cultural practices. It does not fund technological R&D.
How to access it: Through competitive calls published in the EU Funding & Tenders Portal, under the Creative Europe annual work programmes.
When to use it:
✓ For cross-border cultural cooperation projects
✓ For initiatives focused on cultural heritage, audience development and cultural innovation
✓ For projects involving digital engagement, heritage valorisation or cultural tourism
✓ For organisations seeking to strengthen their European networks and international cultural collaboration
Link to official source: Creative Europe - Culture and Creativity

Regional & Interregional Scale-Up

Interregional Innovation Investments (I3 Instrument)

Level: European
Managing authority: European Commission (DG REGIO), implemented by EISMEA.
Type of support: Grant (ERDF-funded competitive instrument under EU Cohesion Policy)
Objectives
The I3 Instrument supports **interregional innovation projects** that are close to market and show strong potential for commercial scaling and value chain integration. The instrument facilitates **co-investment between regions** and provides grants to high-impact projects that connect regions with complementary strengths.
Target beneficiaries: SMEs (primary focus), Clusters and innovation intermediaries, regional authorities, research and technology organisations, higher education and innovation actors embedded in regional ecosystems.
Geographical Scope / Eligibility: The I3 Instrument is primarily open to entities established in EU Member States (at least 3 different Member states) participating in the ERDF cohesion framework. Third countries are generally not eligible for grant funding unless explicitly included in call conditions (rare and specific cases).
Funding mechanism: Competitive calls under ERDF central management.
Strands:

- **Strand 1:** Supports interregional innovation investments in shared or complementary Smart Specialisation areas. The standard EU funding rate is generally 70% of eligible costs. Financial Support to Third Parties may be funded at a higher rate where explicitly provided for in the relevant call.
- **Strand 2a:** Supports the development of interregional value chains with the participation of less developed regions. The standard EU funding rate is generally 70% of eligible costs. Financial Support to Third Parties may be funded at a higher rate where explicitly provided for in the relevant call.
- **Strand 2b:** Supports capacity building and the development of regional innovation ecosystems. Funding conditions are defined in the applicable call.

The exact configuration and funding % may vary depending on the annual work programme
TRL focus: Strands 1 and 2a primarily support innovation investments close to market, generally involving demonstration, deployment, uptake and scale-up activities (TRL 6-9). Exact maturity requirements are call-specific.
How to access it: Through competitive calls published in the EU Funding & Tenders Portal, under the I3 Instrument work programmes.
When to use it:

✓ For close-to-market interregional innovation projects with scaling potential

✓ For initiatives linked to Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3) and regional value chains

✓ For projects aiming to connect less developed and more advanced regions through innovation cooperation

✓ For scaling mature solutions in areas such as smart tourism, cultural heritage technologies or regional digital transformation

Link to official source: Interregional Innovation Investments (I3) Instrument - European Innovation Council and SMEs Executive Agency (EISMEA)

2. EU Funds under shared management

These instruments form part of the EU Multiannual Financial Framework and are implemented under shared management between the European Commission and the Member States. Access to funding is channelled through national or regional programmes and managed by the relevant authorities in accordance with the applicable regulatory framework.

Territorial and Interregional Cooperation

Interreg - ERDF Territorial Cooperation

Level: European
Managing authority: European Commission (DG REGIO) sets the strategic and regulatory framework. Implementation is carried out by Managing Authorities designated for each Interreg programme.
Type of support: Grant (co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund – ERDF)
Objectives
Interreg aims to **strengthen economic, social and territorial cohesion** across Europe by supporting cross-border, transnational and interregional cooperation.
Interreg is organised into four strands:

- **Interreg A:** Cross-border cooperation
- **Interreg B:** Transnational cooperation
- **Interreg C:** Interregional cooperation
- **Interreg D:** Cooperation with outermost regions

Target beneficiaries: Public authorities (primary beneficiaries), Regional development agencies, research organisations, Universities, SMEs (in partnership), NGOs
Geographical Scope / Eligibility: Projects are implemented through cross-border or transnational consortia. Participation is primarily open to EU Member States, but may also include pre-accession countries, EEA countries and neighbouring partner countries, depending on the specific Interreg programme strand and Geographical Scope.
Funding mechanism
Co-financed grant model under ERDF rules. Funding rates typically range between 70% and 80% (depending on programme and region)
Typical project size: €1M – €5M (depending on the programme, it can be higher in transnational strands)
TRL focus: Not formally TRL-based. Interreg typically supports pilot actions, territorial experimentation, regional deployment, policy alignment and governance models
Often situated in mid-to-late innovation stages (testing and territorial implementation rather than early R&D)
How to access it: Through competitive calls published by each Interreg programme's Managing Authority. Application procedures and calls vary depending on the specific Interreg programme and geographical cooperation area.
When to use it:
✓ For cross-border or transnational cooperation projects between regions
✓ For initiatives related to regional innovation ecosystems or Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3)

✓ For projects addressing sustainable tourism, cultural heritage valorisation or climate adaptation of heritage sites
✓ For pilot actions and territorial experimentation involving public authorities, regional stakeholders and innovation actors
Link to official source: [Home - Interreg EU]

Cohesion & Territorial Development Funds (Shared Management EU Funds managed at National/Regional level)

These instruments are part of the EU Multiannual Financial Framework but are implemented under **shared management** between the **European Commission and Member States**. Funding is accessed through national or regional programmes and calls.

European Regional Development Fund (ERDF – Regional Programmes)

Level: European / Regional
Managing authority: European Commission (DG REGIO) under shared management with Member States. Implementation is carried out by national or regional Managing Authorities designated by each Member State. Strong territorial and policy alignment logic (place-based investment).
Type of support: Grants (primarily non-repayable support; may also contribute to financial instruments at regional level).
Objectives
The ERDF aims to **strengthen economic, social and territorial cohesion in the European Union** by **correcting regional imbalances** and supporting sustainable regional development.
For the 2021–2027 period, ERDF investments are structured around five Policy Objectives (PO):
- PO1. A more competitive and smarter Europe (innovation, digitalisation, SME support)
- PO2. A greener, low-carbon Europe
- PO3. A more connected Europe (mobility and connectivity)
- PO4. A more social and inclusive Europe
- PO5. A Europe closer to citizens (sustainable urban development and local initiatives)

Target beneficiaries: Depending on regional Operational Programmes (Programmes 2021–2027), beneficiaries may include National, regional and local public authorities, SMEs and mid-caps. research centres and universities, clusters and innovation ecosystems, cultural and creative sector organisations, public-private partnerships.
Eligibility and thematic focus depend on regional priorities and Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3) which are place-based regional innovation strategies that concentrate EU funding on each region's most promising strengths to foster smart, sustainable and competitive growth.
Geographical Scope / Eligibility: Eligible applicants must be established in an EU Member State (with allocation differentiated by level of regional development: less developed, transition, and more developed regions).
Funding mechanism: ERDF operates through co-financed national and regional

programmes under shared management.

- EU co-financing rates typically range between 50% and 85%, depending on the category of region
- Calls for proposals are published at regional or national level.
- Investments must align with regional development priorities and S3s.
- Co-financing rates vary depending on the category of region (higher for less developed regions).

ERDF may also support financial instruments (e.g., regional funds, guarantees) managed at programme level.

TRL focus: It is not formally TRL-based; Depending on the relevant national or regional programme, it may support activities across different stages of the innovation and deployment chain.

How to access it: Through calls for proposals published by the relevant national or regional Managing Authority under each ERDF programme. Access conditions vary depending on the territory, programme priorities and investment framework.

When to use it:

✓ For projects strongly aligned with regional development priorities

✓ For digitalisation of cultural institutions, heritage valorisation or smart tourism destinations

✓ For regional innovation ecosystems, creative industries and public service modernisation

✓ For place-based projects combining heritage, tourism, urban regeneration, digital transition or SME competitiveness

Link to official source: European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) - European Commission

European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)

Level: European / National / Regional

Managing authority: European Commission (primarily DG EMPL – Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion), implemented under **shared management** with Member States and designated national/regional Managing Authorities.

Type of support: Grants (non-repayable funding for social, employment, inclusion, education and skills policies)

Objectives

The European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) is the **EU's main financial instrument for supporting employment, social inclusion, education, skills development and equality**.

ESF+ brings together several previous strands — including the European Social Fund (ESF), the Youth Employment Initiative (YEI), the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD), and the Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI) programme — into a single, more flexible instrument.

Target beneficiaries: Depending on the national/regional Operational Programmes, beneficiaries may include: Public authorities and managing agencies, employment services and public employment centres, educational and training institutions, NGOs and social enterprises, workers, jobseekers and youth, disadvantaged and vulnerable groups (e.g., long-term unemployed, migrants, persons with disabilities), SMEs benefiting from skills development programmes

Geographical Scope / Eligibility: Eligible applicants must be established an EU Member State (implementation and priorities defined by national/regional Operational Programmes under shared management.

Funding mechanism:

- ESF funding varies between 40-85%
- Member States prepare Operational Programmes aligned with ESF+ objectives, which are approved by the Commission.
- Calls for proposals are issued at national or regional level by Managing Authorities.
- Co-financing: ESF+ resources are complemented by national/regional funding in accordance with co-financing rates set in the regulations.

TRL focus: Not applicable. ESF+ funds human capital and social policy interventions rather than technology development.

How to access it: Through calls for proposals and funding schemes published by the relevant national or regional Managing Authorities under each ESF+ programme.

When to use it:

✓ For projects focused on skills development, training, employability and lifelong learning

✓ For initiatives promoting social inclusion, equal opportunities or support for disadvantaged groups

✓ For workforce development in sectors such as heritage, tourism, culture or the creative industries

✓ For projects where the main added value lies in people, skills and inclusion, rather than infrastructure or technology development

Link to official source: [What is the ESF+? | European Social Fund Plus]

Just Transition Fund (JTF)

Level: European / National / Regional

Managing authority: European Commission (DG REGIO) – implemented by Member States under shared management.

Type of support: Grants

Objectives

The Just Transition Fund (JTF) **supports regions most affected by the transition towards climate neutrality to mitigate social and economic impacts**. Its main goals are to:

- Facilitate economic diversification and reconversion of regions dependent on high-carbon activities
- Support reskilling and upskilling of workers affected by the transition
- Promote investments in low-carbon jobs and innovation
- Reduce regional disparities linked to the shift to climate neutrality

The Fund is part of the broader European Green Deal and Cohesion Policy framework, and complements ERDF and Cohesion Fund investments.

Target beneficiaries: Depending on national/local Just Transition Plans approved by the Commission, beneficiaries include workers and communities affected by the transition, SMEs and entrepreneurs active in diversification projects, public authorities and local/regional bodies implementing transition actions, training and education providers, energy-intensive industries undergoing decarbonisation, research and innovation actors in green technologies.

Geographical Scope / Eligibility: Eligible applicants must be established in EU Member States with regions identified as facing significant transitional challenges (e.g., coal regions, carbon-intensive industrial areas).
Funding mechanism: The JTF operates under shared management and is aligned with the Just Transition Plans agreed between Member States and the European Commission

- EU co-financing rates may reach up to 85% in less developed regions
- Actions financed through open calls, direct grants or territorial projects depending on the Plan
- Co-financing is provided by Member States based on fund rules and regional categories

TRL focus: Not defined in programme documentation. Emphasis is placed on implementation of transition actions.
How to access it: Through the national or regional programmes and funding procedures established under the relevant Just Transition Plans, usually managed by the competent Managing Authorities.
When to use it:
✓ For projects supporting economic diversification and social transition in regions affected by decarbonisation
✓ For reskilling, upskilling and employment-related actions linked to the green transition
✓ For initiatives involving industrial heritage regeneration, green tourism or sustainable local development
✓ For projects where heritage, tourism or digital skills contribute to broader climate neutrality and socio-economic transition goals
Link to official source: Just Transition Fund - European Commission

Under the EU Cohesion Policy framework, several complementary instruments support economic, social and territorial development across Member States. The **European Regional Development Fund (ERDF),** the **Cohesion Fund (CF),** the **European Social Fund Plus** (ESF+) and the **Just Transition Fund** (JTF) operate under the Common Provisions Regulation (CPR) and are implemented in shared management between the European Commission and the Member States. Together, they co-finance investments aimed at reducing regional disparities, strengthening innovation and competitiveness, promoting environmental sustainability, improving transport connectivity, and supporting employment, skills development and social inclusion, with the JTF specifically addressing territories most affected by the transition towards climate neutrality.

3. EU - Coordinated, Networking and Ecosystem-Based Initiatives

Research, innovation & networking

COST – European Cooperation in Science and Technology

Level: European
Managing authority: Funded by the European Union under Horizon Europe; implemented by the COST Association (Brussels-based international non-profit association)
Type of support: Networking grant (research coordination and community-building funding)
Objectives
COST aims to strengthen European **research cooperation** by funding bottom-up, open, and inclusive **research networks** (COST Actions). It supports the coordination of nationally funded research activities and promotes interdisciplinary collaboration across Europe and beyond.
Target beneficiaries: Researchers (all career stages), universities and research centres, public institutions, SMEs, policy makers and stakeholders,
Participants join COST Actions as network members rather than traditional grant beneficiaries.
Geographical Scope / Eligibility: Open to COST Member Countries; broader international participation possible.
Funding mechanism: The **COST Actions** are bottom-up thematic networks approved through competitive evaluation. Covers networking activities (meetings, workshops, conferences, short-term scientific missions, dissemination). COST does **not** fund research activities, equipment, or salaries.
TRL focus: Not formally TRL-based. Primarily supports early-stage research coordination, knowledge exchange and community building (typically pre-commercial and low TRL environments - TRL 1–4).
How to access it: Through open calls for proposals for new COST Actions. Proposals are submitted by international research networks via the COST online submission system and evaluated competitively.
When to use it:
✓ To build or join European research networks around emerging topics
✓ To develop interdisciplinary communities and exchange knowledge
✓ To prepare future Horizon Europe or other large EU collaborative projects
✓ To explore early-stage themes such as digital heritage preservation, AI ethics, data interoperability or cultural policy coordination
Link to official source: COST | European Cooperation in Science and Technology

Innovation Ecosystems and Knowledge Communities

EIT Culture & Creativity (EIT C&C) calls

Level: European

Managing authority: The European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT) is an EU body under Horizon Europe Pillar III – Innovative Europe. EIT Culture & Creativity is implemented through a **Knowledge and Innovation Community (KIC),** a long-term pan-European partnership bringing together business, education and research actors.

Type of support: Grant + Innovation & Business Support Services

Objectives

EIT Culture & Creativity **strengthens the competitiveness, sustainability and innovation capacity of Europe's cultural and creative sectors** by supporting entrepreneurship, innovation, skills development and collaboration across the knowledge triangle of education, research and business. EIT Culture & Creativity operates through the **KIC model**, which combines innovation activities, entrepreneurial education and business creation/acceleration services. Its opportunities typically include innovation projects, venture support, mentoring, investor matchmaking, education and skills initiatives, and other ecosystem-building actions

The model integrates the knowledge triangle (education – research – business).

Target beneficiaries:

Startups, scale-ups, SMEs in cultural and creative sectors, research organisations and universities, cultural institutions, creative enterprises, clusters and innovation ecosystems

Geographical Scope / Eligibility: Eligible applicants are typically legal entities established in EU Member States or in countries associated with Horizon Europe, depending on the specific call or opportunity

Funding mechanism: EIT C&C delivers support through annual and rolling opportunities, typically including:

- **Innovation Calls** (e.g., Main Innovation Projects; Short Innovation Projects)
- **Business Creation & Acceleration** programmes (venture building, mentoring, investor matchmaking)
- **Education & Skills calls** (Master's/PhD modules, training)

In addition to EIT-funded actions, KICs may include non-EIT funded activities (NEFAs) that contribute to the KIC's impact and knowledge-triangle objectives.

Funding rate: Funding amounts, reimbursement rates and co-funding requirements vary by call and type of opportunity.

TRL focus: Not formally TRL-based. Innovation calls may support validation, demonstration and market uptake, while education, skills and ecosystem-building opportunities follow different maturity criteria.

How to access it: Through open calls, funding opportunities and other competitive application processes published on the EIT Culture & Creativity opportunities portal. Depending on the scheme, applicants may apply to innovation calls, business acceleration programmes, education initiatives, requests for proposals or expressions of interest.

When to use it:

✓ For entrepreneurship, venture building and scale-up support in the cultural and creative sectors

✓ For projects combining innovation, market deployment and skills development

✓ For initiatives involving immersive technologies, digital storytelling, creative AI or hybrid cultural experiences

✓ For organisations seeking ecosystem-building, investment readiness and cross-sector innovation support in areas linked to culture, heritage and tourism

Link to official source: Leading Culture & Creative Innovation | EIT Culture & Creativity

Strategic EU State Aid Frameworks

Important Projects of Common European Interest (IPCEI)

Level: European
Managing authority: European Commission primarily DG COMP, in close cooperation with participating Member States. Projects are jointly notified and approved under [Article 107(3)(b) TFEU] in accordance with the IPCEI Communication (2021).
Type of support: State aid (large-scale strategic projects authorised under EU State Aid rules)
Important access note: IPCEIs are not standard open EU funding calls. Potential participants normally enter through national identification or pre-selection processes coordinated by Member State authorities. Their relevance to digital cultural heritage is therefore exceptional and usually indirect.
Objectives
IPCEIs support highly strategic **cross-border projects that address major market failures**, enable breakthrough innovation, and strengthen Europe's industrial competitiveness, resilience and strategic autonomy
IPCEIs are designed to finance projects that would not materialise without public support due to their scale, risk level and systemic importance ("funding gap" rationale). IPCEIs typically focus on strategic sectors such as microelectronics, batteries, hydrogen technologies, Cloud and Next Generation Computing, health technologies
Target beneficiaries: Primarily large industrial consortia, including large enterprises, strategic SMEs integrated into value chains, research and technology organisations (RTOs), industrial partners across several Member States. Participation requires strong cross-border collaboration and alignment with national industrial strategies.
Geographical Scope / Eligibility: Projects involve coordinated participation by multiple **EU Member States** and are supported from national budgets. Projects must involve at least four Member States unless justified otherwise.
Funding mechanism:

- Public funding granted by Member States as authorised State aid
- Aid intensity can exceed standard State aid thresholds where justified
- Funding covers the identified "funding gap" necessary to make the project viable

Funding levels vary significantly depending on the scale and strategic importance of the project.
TRL focus: Primarily higher TRLs (approximately TRL 6–9), including demonstration, first industrial deployment, large-scale industrial implementation. IPCEIs support projects close to market but with high industrial systemic impact.
How to access it: Not through a standard open EU call. Companies interested in participating should engage with the competent national authorities in the relevant Member States, since Member States lead the formation of IPCEIs, identify the scope, and pre-select participants before notification to the Commission.
When to use it:
✓ For exceptionally large and strategically important cross-border industrial projects
✓ Where the project addresses a major market failure and forms part of a value chain prioritised by participating Member States
✓ For digital cultural heritage only where it is embedded in a broader strategic industrial

initiative, rather than as a stand-alone heritage project

Link to official source: IPCEI - Competition Policy - European Commission and Important Projects of Common European Interest (IPCEI): a game-changer for businesses

The EU funding landscape supports the full innovation cycle, from knowledge creation to skills development and large-scale deployment. At the research and early innovation stage, **Horizon Europe** funds collaborative research, technological development and demonstration projects, while the **European Innovation Council** supports breakthrough technologies and high-risk, high-potential ventures through grants, blended finance and equity investment. Human capital is reinforced through **Erasmus+,** which supports education, training, mobility and capacity building to equip learners and professionals with digital and sector-specific skills.

Deployment and adoption are enabled by the **Digital Europe Programme**, which invests in strategic digital capacities, and the **Connecting Europe Facility,** which finances cross-border digital connectivity infrastructure. Market uptake, entrepreneurship and SME competitiveness are further supported through **Creative Europe** and the **Single Market Programme**. Interregional diffusion and territorial scale-up are promoted through **Interreg and the Interregional Innovation Investments Instrument**, while **Important Projects of Common European Interest** provide a State aid framework enabling Member States to jointly support large-scale strategic industrial projects of European relevance.

Other Coordinated / Sectoral Opportunities

TMO Synergy Grants Programme

Level: European / transnational sectoral opportunity
Managing authority: Time Machine Organisation (TMO), in the framework of the **3DBigDataSpace** and **3D-4CH** projects. The programme is coordinated by TMO and co-financed by the European Commission and the Austrian Research Promotion Agency.
Type of support: Small-scale grant / seed funding
Objectives: The TMO Synergy Grants Programme aims to provide **seed funding** for local and regional communities active in digital cultural heritage, with a particular focus on **3D assets, digitisation capacity, data harmonisation, modern technology uptake and skills transfer**. It is designed to stimulate practical collaboration across institutions, disciplines and territories, and to generate reusable tools, workflows and know-how for the broader Time Machine and cultural heritage ecosystem.
Target beneficiaries: Local and regional communities, cultural heritage stakeholders, institutions and organisations working with 3D cultural heritage assets, digitisation, outreach or training. The programme appears especially relevant for museums, heritage institutions, local ecosystems, applied innovation actors and members of the Time Machine community seeking small-scale support for concrete pilot actions.
Geographical Scope / Eligibility: The programme is positioned as a European cultural heritage opportunity open to communities and stakeholders linked to the Time Machine ecosystem. Specific eligibility rules depend on each individual call and should be checked in the dedicated application pages.
Funding mechanism: Funding is structured through three types of grants within a three-year scheme with a total budget of €70,000:

- Data Synergy Grants: 2 grants of €10,000 each, for converting digital 3D cultural heritage assets into standardised data formats and integrating them into long-term storage systems
- Outreach Synergy Grants: 2 grants of €10,000 each, for developing extended reality applications using digital 3D assets and tools to showcase the cultural heritage of cities and regions
- Training Synergy Grants: 6 grants of €5,000 each, for preparing in-person workshops focused on digitising 3D cultural heritage assets

This is a project- or initiative-based opportunity rather than a permanent EU funding programme.
TRL focus: Not formally TRL-based. However, the programme is mainly oriented toward applied implementation, capacity building, interoperability, demonstrators, outreach uses and training.
How to access it: Through open calls and dedicated application pages published by the Time Machine Organisation. The public overview page provides the overall scheme and indicates that applicants should consult the specific linked call pages for detailed application information. TMO also states that pre-announcements are first circulated within its community before broader public dissemination through its newsletter and social media.
When to use it:
✓ For small pilot actions in 3D cultural heritage
✓ For standardising and integrating 3D heritage data into interoperable or long-term

storage systems
✓ For XR / outreach applications based on existing digital heritage assets
✓ For hands-on training and capacity building in 3D digitisation
✓ For organisations that need light, flexible seed funding rather than a large collaborative EU project
Link to official source: [TMO Synergy Grants Programme : Time Machine Europe]()

4. EU Financial Instruments

InvestEU

Level: European
Managing authority: European Commission (DG GROW) in partnership with the European Investment Bank Group (EIB & EIF) and other implementing partners.
Type of support: Financial instruments (EU budget guarantee enabling Loans, Guarantees, Equity and quasi-equity financing).
Objectives
InvestEU aims to **mobilise public and private investment in support of EU policy priorities** by addressing market failures, improving access to finance and supporting sustainable infrastructure, innovation, digitalisation and SME growth.
InvestEU operates as the successor to the European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI) and centralises EU-level financial instruments under one framework.
The programme is structured around four policy windows: Sustainable Infrastructure, Research, Innovation and Digitalisation, SMEs, Social Investment and Skills.
Target beneficiaries:
Indirect access via financial intermediaries (banks, investment funds, promotional banks). Final beneficiaries may include SMEs and mid-caps, large companies, public authorities, public–private partnerships, financial intermediaries, and non-profit or social economy organisations that implement economically viable projects aligned with EU policy priorities such as sustainability, innovation, digitalisation, and social investment.
Geographical Scope / Eligibility: Eligible applicants must be established in EU Member States (with possible participation of associated countries depending on implementing agreements).
Funding mechanism: InvestEU operates through an **EU budget guarantee** that backs financing operations delivered by the EIB Group and other implementing partners. It is designed to share risk and crowd in additional private and public investment.
TRL focus: InvestEU does not use formal TRL levels in its regulation or eligibility criteria. The programme supports financing for projects that are technically and economically viable with backing from the EU budget guarantee through financial intermediaries. In practice, this means InvestEU typically facilitates investment-ready and deployment-oriented projects rather than early research activities, since eligibility depends on institutional financial assessment of project viability.
How to access it: Indirectly, through participating financial intermediaries, such as banks, promotional institutions, investment platforms and funds operating under InvestEU.
When to use it:
✓ For projects that need repayable finance rather than grants
✓ For investment-ready initiatives with a viable business or financing model
✓ For scaling infrastructure, digitalisation or business growth projects
✓ For modernisation of cultural infrastructure, digital transformation of heritage and tourism services, or growth of SMEs in cultural, creative or digital sectors
Link to official source: InvestEU - Comisión Europea

European Investment Bank (EIB)

Level: European

Managing authority: European Investment Bank, the EU's long-term lending institution and part of the EIB Group. The European Investment Bank is an EU institution jointly owned by EU Member States with operational links to the European Commission, national authorities and financial intermediaries. It provides finance for projects that support EU policy objectives such as growth, jobs, climate action, innovation, infrastructure and cohesion.
Type of support: Loans, investments and advisory services (long-term financing, blended finance, guarantees and equity through investment funds).
Objectives
The EIB supports the economic, social and environmental objectives of the European Union by **financing investment projects that contribute to sustainable growth, innovation, infrastructure, cohesion, climate action and digital transformation**.
Target beneficiaries: Public sector entities (national, regional and local authorities); private clients of all sizes (including large corporations, mid-caps, SMEs and micro-enterprises through intermediated lending); investment programme sponsors and consortia; and innovative firms seeking equity or hybrid financing.
Geographical Scope / Eligibility: The EIB finances investment projects in EU Member States. It also supports programmes aligned with EU policies outside the EU in eligible partner countries.
Funding mechanism: The EIB provides long-term financing through a range of financial products tailored to project size and promoter profile:

- **Direct loans** for large-scale projects promoted by public authorities, infrastructure operators or corporate entities.
- **Intermediated lending** through commercial banks and financial institutions, which on-lend EIB funds to SMEs, mid-caps and smaller projects.
- **Guarantees and risk-sharing** instruments to reduce investment risk and mobilise additional private capital.
- **Equity and quasi-equity investments** implemented in cooperation with the European Investment Fund (EIF), particularly to support innovation ecosystems and SME growth.

The EIB raises capital on international financial markets and lends on favourable terms aligned with EU policy objectives. Its financing may be combined with EU grants, national funding or other financial instruments as part of blended structures
TRL focus: Not formally defined by TRLs. The EIB generally finances investment-ready, deployment-oriented projects that align with EU strategic objectives.
How to access it: Through direct financing requests for large projects or through participating financial intermediaries for smaller-scale operations. Advisory and technical support services are also available to project promoters.
When to use it:
✓ For large-scale investment projects with clear economic and social impact
✓ For infrastructure, digitalisation, sustainability or regional development projects
✓ For modernisation of cultural and heritage infrastructure as part of broader investment programmes
✓ For sustainable tourism infrastructure, digital public services or platform scaling where projects are financially viable and strategically aligned with EU priorities
Link to official source: Homepage | European Investment Bank

European Investment Fund (EIF)

Level: European
Managing authority: the EIF is an EU financial institution and specialised entity within the European Investment Bank (EIB) Group. The EIF is majority-owned by the European Investment Bank (EIB), with additional shareholders including the European Commission and financial institutions.
Type of support: Equity investments (venture capital & growth funds), guarantees, microfinance and risk-sharing financial instruments aimed at improving access to finance for SMEs and innovation-driven enterprises.
Objectives
The EIF **improves access to finance for micro-enterprises, SMEs, start-ups, scale-ups and innovation-driven companies** by supporting lending, investment and risk-sharing mechanisms through financial intermediaries
The EIF contributes to EU priorities by mobilising private capital, fostering market development and closing financing gaps (particularly for smaller and younger firms).
Target beneficiaries: The EIF operates through financial intermediaries such as banks, guarantee institutions and venture capital or private equity funds to improve access to finance for micro-enterprises, SMEs, start-ups, scale-ups and other innovation-driven companies across Europe.
Geographical Scope / Eligibility: The EIF operates primarily in the European Union and in certain associated countries, depending on the mandate or financial instrument.
Funding mechanism: The EIF operates primarily through:

- **Equity instruments,** including investments in venture capital and private equity funds supporting early-stage and growth companies
- **Guarantee and credit enhancement** instruments, including portfolio guarantees and securitisation, aimed at reducing risk for financial institutions and stimulating SME lending
- **Microfinance and inclusive finance** instruments targeting underserved market segments

The EIF also manages mandates on behalf of the European Commission, Member States and other public institutions, including implementation under programmes such as InvestEU.
TRL focus: The EIF does not define formal TRL levels. Its instruments address financing barriers across the technology and business life cycle.
How to access it: Indirectly, through participating **financial intermediaries**, such as banks, guarantee institutions, venture capital funds and private equity funds supported by the EIF.
When to use it:
✓ For SMEs, start-ups or scale-ups that need access to finance rather than grants
✓ For companies seeking venture capital, growth capital or guaranteed lending
✓ For projects involving digital transformation, innovation or business scaling
✓ For firms in the cultural, creative, tourism or digital heritage ecosystem that may benefit from intermediary-backed finance for growth and market expansion
Link to official source: Homepage | EIF | European Investment Fund

European Innovation Council Fund (EIC fund)

Level: European
Managing authority: European Commission as shareholder, with the European Investment Bank (EIB) acting as investment advisor and an external Fund Manager responsible for portfolio and investment decisions.
Type of support: Equity investment / venture-style public investment
Objectives
The EIC Fund is the **venture capital investment arm of the European Innovation Council (EIC)**. It was established in 2020 and operates as an **investment fund under private law** with the European Commission as shareholder. It provides the investment component of the **EIC Accelerator** and the **EIC STEP Scale Up** call.
The EIC Fund aims to bridge the funding gap for high-risk European deep-tech companies by providing patient capital and crowding in private co-investment.
Target beneficiaries: Startups, SMEs and scale-ups developing high-risk deep-tech innovations, from early-stage ventures to more mature scale-up companies, across the EU and Horizon Europe associated countries. It is most relevant for companies with strong innovation potential, commercial ambition and capacity to attract follow-on investment.
Geographical Scope / Eligibility: Primarily open to companies established in EU Member States and Horizon Europe associated countries, in line with the eligibility conditions of the relevant EIC instrument.
Funding mechanism:
The EIC Fund provides **minority equity investments**, typically around **10%** and up to **25%**, and may participate in follow-on rounds. Investment sizes currently range from:

- **€0.5M to €10M** under the **EIC Accelerator**
- **€10M to €30M** under **EIC STEP Scale Up**

TRL focus: Not formally defined by TRLs, but typically oriented towards innovation-driven companies at stages where technologies are moving from validation and demonstration towards commercial scaling and market expansion.
How to access it: Indirectly, through successful application to relevant EIC instruments, particularly the EIC Accelerator and EIC STEP Scale Up, which include an equity investment component.
When to use it:
✓ For high-risk deep-tech companies that need equity investment rather than grants or loans
✓ For ventures with strong scaling potential and strategic relevance for Europe
✓ For projects involving AI, data technologies, digital twins, immersive technologies or advanced digital platforms
✓ For innovation-driven companies in cultural, creative, heritage or tourism-related fields where the business model is highly scalable and technology-intensive
Link to official source: EIC Fund - European Innovation Council - European Commission

The **European Investment Bank (EIB) Group** consists of the **European Investment Bank** (EIB) and the **European Investment Fund (EIF),** which operate as complementary EU financial institutions. While the EIB provides large-scale long-term financing for infrastructure, public investment and corporate projects, the EIF specialises in risk finance instruments such as equity and guarantees for SMEs and innovation-driven companies, acting exclusively through financial intermediaries. Under the **InvestEU** programme, both institutions serve as implementing partners: the European Commission provides the EU budget guarantee, and the EIB and EIF deploy it through their respective financial instruments to mobilise investment in line with EU policy priorities.

5. Intergovernmental / Coordinated Funding

EUREKA Network & funding schemes

Level: European / International
Managing authority: The network is governed by the ministries and funding agencies of participating countries, with a Secretariat based in Brussels coordinating network activities, strategic alignment, and programme support.
Type of support: Intergovernmental framework for collaborative R&D funding; funding is decentralised and provided via national calls managed by participating national funding bodies.
Objectives
The Eureka Network is the world's largest **intergovernmental network for international cooperation in research, development and innovation**. Its main goals are to:

- Stimulate **market-oriented R&D and innovation cooperation** across borders
- Enhance competitiveness and economic growth of participating countries
- Support the development and commercialisation of innovative products, processes and services
- Foster international industrial collaboration beyond EU borders

Target beneficiaries: Beneficiaries vary by country and programme, but typically include SMEs and start-ups, large companies, research organisations and universities, public bodies participating in collaborative R&D projects.
Actual eligibility and funding levels are determined by national funding bodies in each participating country according to their own policies.
Geographical Scope / Eligibility: The geographic scope encompasses more than 45 countries worldwide, including EU Member States and partner countries across Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Americas.
Funding mechanism:

- The network itself does not hold a central Eureka budget. Funding is **decentralised** and provided by national funding bodies in each participating country.
- Project consortia must obtain approval and funding from the relevant national bodies.
- Eureka provides a **common framework, labels and coordination**, but money is disbursed under national rules and calls.

Typical funding channels include programmes under the EUREKA Network such as

- Eurostars – co-funded international R&D projects led by innovative SMEs, focused on market-oriented solutions.
- Globalstars – joint calls enabling collaboration between Eureka countries and partners outside the network.
- Innowwide – lump-sum grants supporting international feasibility and market exploration studies for SMEs.
- Network Projects – bottom-up, continuously open collaborative R&D projects financed through national funding agencies (grants, loans, or mixed schemes depending on country rules).
- Eureka Clusters – thematic, sector-driven calls targeting strategic industrial and technological domains.
- Investment Readiness and fast-track schemes – support services and pathways

facilitating access to private investment or acceleration towards European Innovation Council instruments.

TRL focus: Eureka supports market-oriented R&D and innovation. Projects often range roughly from mid-stage development to pre-commercial deployment, rather than early basic research.

How to access it: Through the relevant EUREKA scheme pages and the associated national funding bodies. Applicants usually form an international consortium, choose the appropriate EUREKA scheme, and then apply in line with both the EUREKA process and the national funding rules of the participating countries.

When to use it:

✓ For international collaborative R&D projects with a strong market orientation

✓ For organisations seeking cooperation beyond a single country's innovation ecosystem

✓ For SMEs, companies and research actors developing applied digital solutions with commercial potential

✓ For projects in areas such as digital heritage, tourism technology, platforms or services, where the proposal is clearly framed as collaborative innovation and market-oriented development

Link to official source: Eureka - Eureka Network

Vanguard Initiative & VInnovate

Level: European/ Regional

Managing authority: The Vanguard Initiative is governed by participating European regional authorities. It operates through a structured governance model involving member regions, thematic pilot coordination and dedicated support structures. VInnovate is implemented by participating regional authorities, which allocate or align regional innovation funds to support joint interregional projects. The initiative is not directly managed by the European Commission.

Type of support: Interregional innovation cooperation framework with coordinated regional co-funding mechanisms, primarily enabled through instruments like **VInnovate** and aligned regional programmes.

Objectives

The Vanguard Initiative is a **unique alliance of European regions focused on strengthening industrial competitiveness, innovation ecosystems and regional excellence** by:

- Connecting regional governments, universities, research institutes, clusters and industry to co-develop strategic innovation projects.
- Driving interregional cooperation based on Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3).
- Accelerating the deployment and scaling of innovations through pilot projects and strategic roadmaps.
- Contributing to EU industrial and innovation policy design and implementation.
- Mobilising collaborative resources and enabling joint programming of innovation-driven activities across regions.

The network promotes collaboration in strategic areas such as advanced manufacturing, energy systems, AI, bioeconomy and other thematic pilot domains through interregional pilot projects and platforms.

VInnovate was developed to operationalise these objectives by enabling coordinated financial support for interregional innovation projects emerging from Vanguard pilot activities.

Target beneficiaries: The initiative does not directly fund beneficiaries. However, through VInnovate and related regional mechanisms, supported entities may include SMEs and mid-caps, industrial clusters, research and technology organisations, universities, regional innovation ecosystems, industry-led consortia aligned with S3 priorities.

Geographical Scope / Eligibility: The Initiative primarily covers European regions participating in its network. Projects typically involve at least two or more Vanguard member regions. Final eligibility and funding conditions depend on the regional rules of the participating territories

Funding mechanism: Vanguard Initiative itself does not hold a centralised EU budget.

- Funding is mobilised through coordinated regional instruments.
- **VInnovate aligns or pools regional resources to support interregional collaborative innovation projects.**
- Regions may draw on existing funding sources such as ERDF-backed regional programmes or national innovation schemes.
- Financial support is granted under regional rules, but within a jointly agreed interregional framework.

This creates a bottom-up interregional co-financing model, rather than a centrally managed EU call.

TRL focus: Not formally defined by the initiative. Vanguard pilots and VInnovate projects generally target mid-to-high maturity innovation stages, focusing on demonstration, industrial validation and market uptake across regions.

How to access it: Through participation in the Vanguard Initiative network, its thematic pilot activities, and the specific regional funding mechanisms or aligned calls made available by participating regions under VInnovate or related cooperation frameworks.

When to use it:

✓ For projects requiring interregional cooperation between innovation ecosystems

✓ For initiatives strongly aligned with Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3)

✓ For pilot or demonstration activities involving clusters, SMEs, research organisations and regional authorities

✓ For digital heritage or tourism innovation only where these fit within broader regional innovation, industrial or ecosystem-building priorities

Link to official source: https://www.s3vanguardinitiative.eu/;

6. Private Investment and Strategic Capital

Private investment is not equivalent to grant funding. It generally requires an investable legal entity, a credible business model, growth potential and an expected financial or strategic return. Investors normally expect financial returns and may require equity, repayment, convertible instruments, governance rights or other commercial conditions. These pathways are therefore mainly relevant for organisations with a viable business model, revenue potential and a credible route to growth or repayment.

Business Angels- Early-stage private investors

Level: Private / European, national or regional, depending on the investor or investor network

Type of support: Equity investment, typically at pre-seed or seed stage. In some cases, support may also be provided through convertible notes, SAFE-type instruments, or co-investment/syndication structures with other private or public investors.

Objective: Business angels provide early-stage capital to innovative companies with strong growth potential. Beyond financing, they often contribute **mentoring, strategic guidance, sector expertise, market access and access to investor and commercial networks**. In the field of cultural heritage and tourism, they are most relevant for ventures that combine heritage assets with digital innovation, scalable services or technology-based business models.

Target beneficiaries: Early-stage startups, spin-offs and SMEs with a for-profit model, a strong founding team, and a credible pathway to growth. Within the heritage and tourism space, business angels are more likely to support ventures positioned as:

- heritage tech or tourism-tech startups
- XR / immersive experience companies
- digital content and storytelling platforms
- SaaS or B2B tools for museums, archives, heritage sites or tourism operators
- AI, data or marketplace solutions linked to cultural or tourism services

Purely non-profit heritage digitisation projects are generally less suited to this type of financing unless they are embedded in a scalable commercial model.

Geographical Scope / Eligibility: Depends on the investor or network. Some business angels invest locally or nationally, while others operate across Europe. Eligibility is usually based not on formal territorial rules, but on the startup's growth potential, sector fit, investment readiness and scalability.

Funding Mechanism: Funding is provided through private capital invested directly by individual business angels or via angel syndicates and networks. In some cases, this may be combined with public co-investment schemes, accelerator support or subsequent venture capital rounds.

How to access it: Usually through:

- angel investor networks and associations
- startup pitching events and demo days
- accelerators and incubators
- co-investment platforms
- sector-focused innovation communities

For projects in cultural heritage, creative industries and tourism, relevant access points may include [EIT Culture & Creativity's investment ecosystem], as well as national or regional angel networks active in creative tech, digital media, tourism innovation or impact-oriented entrepreneurship.

When to use it

✓ For for-profit ventures with a clear growth strategy

✓ When the project goes beyond simple digitisation and becomes a scalable product or service

✓ When the company needs not only funding but also smart capital, including mentoring, partnerships and access to first clients

✓ For startups working in heritage tech, creative tech, immersive experiences, digital content, tourism-tech or digital tools for cultural institutions

Typical access points include European and national business angel networks, creative-industry investor communities, accelerator programmes, pitching events and investment-readiness initiatives. The relevance and current activity of each network should be verified before contact.

Family Offices | Private capital from wealthy families

Level: Private (international / European / national, depending on the family office)

Type of support: Private investment. Support may take the form of direct equity investment, co-investment, fund investment, venture or growth capital, and in some cases philanthropic donations, grants or hybrid support.

Objective: Family offices are private entities that manage the wealth, investments and sometimes philanthropic activities of high-net-worth families. They operate independently, either as single-family offices or multi-family offices. Family offices **aim to preserve and grow family wealth** over the long term, often **combining financial returns with legacy, impact, philanthropy or place-based interests**. In some cases, this makes them relevant for projects linked to cultural heritage, cultural innovation, digital access to heritage assets, tourism innovation or heritage-led regeneration.

Target beneficiaries: Depending on the family office's strategy, potential recipients may include **for-profit** companies, investment funds, scalable ventures, cultural assets, regeneration projects or philanthropic initiatives. Commercial investments generally require a credible financial-return model, while non-profit projects are more likely to be supported through a related foundation or philanthropic vehicle. In this field, they are more likely to support projects framed as creative tech, cultural technology, digital content, immersive experiences, heritage-led hospitality, tourism innovation, or impact-oriented ventures, rather than purely non-profit digitisation projects.

Geographical Scope / Eligibility: There are no standard eligibility rules. Scope depends on the investment strategy of each family office. Some invest internationally; others focus on Europe, specific countries or particular sectors. Access is usually relationship-driven and based on strategic fit rather than open competitive calls.

Funding Mechanism: Funding comes from private capital managed by wealthy families, either directly through family offices or through related vehicles such as impact funds, foundations or co-investment structures. In some cases, family offices combine commercial investment with philanthropic or hybrid support.

How to access it: Usually through direct networking, trusted intermediaries, investment advisors, private banker networks, sector events, startup ecosystems, co-investment platforms or referrals. Unlike public programmes, family offices do not normally operate through open calls. Access is generally based on personal introductions, strategic alignment and investment readiness.

When to use it

✔ When the project aligns with family-office priorities such as legacy, impact, preservation, education, place-making or cultural value

✔ When flexible capital is needed to complement grants or public funding

✔ When projects combine cultural impact, innovation and public engagement

✔ For digital heritage platforms, heritage-led hospitality, tourism innovation, immersive experiences, restoration with digital components, or cultural innovation pilots

Typical access points: Family offices are generally accessed through trusted intermediaries, investment advisers, private-capital networks, impact-investment communities and sector-specific events. As their strategies and portfolios are often private and may change over time, applicants should conduct individual due diligence rather than relying on static lists of examples.

Venture Capital | Equity investment for high-growth ventures

Level: Private

Type of support: Equity investment. Support is typically provided at seed, Series A or later growth stages, and may also include follow-on rounds, convertible instruments or co-investment structures.

Objective: Venture capital is provided by private VC funds, which invest pooled capital on behalf of limited partners such as institutional investors, family offices, corporations, public financial institutions and high-net-worth individuals.

Venture capital **aims to finance startups and early-growth companies with strong scaling potential**, helping them grow rapidly until a later funding round, acquisition or other exit. In the cultural and creative economy, VC is most relevant for ventures that combine innovation, technology and market potential, rather than projects focused only on non-commercial digitisation.

Target beneficiaries: Primarily **for-profit** startups and scaleups with scalable business models, strong teams, defensible technology or intellectual property, and a credible route to growth. In the field of cultural heritage and tourism, VC is most relevant for ventures positioned as creative tech, cultural tech, immersive or XR experiences, digital media and content platforms, video games or serious games, SaaS tools for museums, archives or visitor management, AI/data tools for collections or audience engagement, and tourism-tech linked to heritage experiences. Pure digitisation projects without a scalable company model are usually not a good fit for VC. This is consistent with broader EU approaches to investable opportunities in the cultural and creative sectors, which tend to favour innovation-led and market-oriented ventures.

Geographical Scope / Eligibility: There are no standard public eligibility rules. Scope depends on each VC fund's mandate, sector focus, ticket size, stage preference and geographic strategy. Some funds invest nationally, others across Europe or internationally. Access is based on commercial attractiveness, investment readiness and fit with the fund thesis, rather than on open competitive calls.

Funding Mechanism Funding is provided through private capital raised by VC funds from limited partners, including institutional investors, family offices, corporates, public financial institutions and wealthy individuals. In Europe, this ecosystem is often reinforced by public-

private leverage mechanisms, especially through the EIF, InvestEU and, in some cases, public equity vehicles such as the EIC Fund.
How to access it: Through direct outreach to VC funds, investor introductions, startup accelerators, pitch events, demo days, innovation ecosystems and co-investment networks.
When to use it
✓ For for-profit ventures with strong scaling potential
✓ When the project goes beyond digitisation and offers a repeatable product, platform or technology-enabled service
✓ When traction, market demand, growth logic and a future exit pathway can be demonstrated
✓ Especially relevant for heritage tech, immersive cultural experiences, digital content/IP ventures, audience-tech, tourism-tech and software tools for cultural institutions
Typical access points: Venture capital is generally accessed through investment networks, accelerators, referrals, pitching events, specialised advisers and direct approaches to funds whose investment thesis matches the company's sector, maturity, geography and funding needs.

Corporate Venture / Corporate Funds | Strategic corporate investment in startups

Level: Private / Strategic corporate capital
Type of support: Equity investment. Support is usually provided through minority equity stakes in startups and scaleups, and may also be combined with commercial partnerships, pilots, distribution support, sector expertise, access to infrastructure or follow-on strategic collaboration. Depending on the corporate investor, some vehicles operate in a way similar to conventional VC funds, while others are more explicitly strategic in their investment rationale.
Objective: Corporate venture capital is provided by established companies through dedicated corporate venture units, internal innovation investment arms, or corporate-backed venture funds financed from the parent company's balance sheet. These corporate investors usually combine financial objectives with strategic objectives such as access to new technologies, business models, innovation pipelines, market intelligence or future acquisition opportunities. This is a widely recognised feature of corporate venture capital compared with traditional VC.
Corporate **venture aims to invest in external startups and scaleups that are strategically relevant to the parent company, while also seeking financial upside**. In the context of cultural heritage and tourism, this type of capital is most relevant when a venture can be positioned in adjacent markets such as digital content, media tech, immersive experiences, visitor technology, edtech, tourism-tech, audience engagement, SaaS or digital platforms. Pure non-commercial digitisation projects are usually not a strong fit.
Target beneficiaries: Primarily for-profit startups and scaleups whose solutions are commercially scalable and strategically relevant to a corporate investor.
Geographical Scope / Eligibility: There are no standard public eligibility rules. Scope depends on the mandate of each corporate venture vehicle. Eligibility is usually determined by strategic fit, growth potential, stage, and relevance to the parent company's sectoral interests rather than through open competitive calls.
Funding Mechanism: Funding is provided through corporate capital, either directly from

the parent company's balance sheet or through dedicated corporate venture units or funds. These vehicles frequently co-invest alongside venture capital funds, business angels or other strategic investors.

How to access it: Through direct outreach to corporate venture units, startup scouting programmes, innovation challenges, accelerators, pitch events, ecosystem introductions and strategic partnership channels.

When to use it

✓ For for-profit ventures that are scalable and strategically relevant to a corporate player

✓ When the solution fits sectors such as media, digital content, immersive experiences, education, mobility, tourism or digital platforms

✓ When the company can offer not only innovation, but also partnership, distribution or strategic value

✓ Especially relevant for startups in creative tech, media-tech, visitor-tech, cultural SaaS, immersive storytelling and platform-based heritage experiences

✓ Less suitable for one-off conservation or non-commercial digitisation projects

Typical access points: Corporate investment opportunities are generally accessed through open innovation programmes, accelerator schemes, strategic partnerships, procurement processes, pilot collaborations or direct engagement with corporate innovation and investment teams.

Impact Investors /impact Funds

Level: Private / impact finance

Type of support: Impact investment. Support may take the form of equity investment, quasi-equity, repayable finance, loans, blended finance, or hybrid structures, depending on the fund and the risk profile of the venture. In some cases, impact-oriented actors may also combine investment with grants, technical assistance or ecosystem-building support.

Objective: Impact investors and impact funds are private investment actors that seek to generate both financial returns and measurable positive social and/or environmental impact. They may include specialised impact funds, foundations with investment arms, social investment vehicles, and blended finance actors.

Impact investors aim to **support ventures that deliver intentional and measurable social or environmental value alongside financial sustainability**. In the context of cultural heritage and tourism, this makes them particularly relevant for projects that combine heritage, creativity, inclusion, regeneration, education, sustainable tourism, place-based development, digital access, or community benefit with a viable operating model. Unlike traditional VC, impact investors may be more open to hybrid models and public-purpose ventures, provided there is a credible path to impact and financial resilience.

Target beneficiaries: Social enterprises, mission-driven startups, hybrid ventures, cultural and creative enterprises, and in some cases SMEs or nonprofit-led models with earned-income capacity. Impact investors are most relevant for ventures positioned around:

- digital access to culture and heritage
- inclusive and community-based cultural innovation
- heritage-led regeneration and place-making
- sustainable cultural tourism
- creative-tech or cultural-tech with a clear public benefit

- audience engagement, education, skills or access initiatives with a viable business model

Purely grant-dependent digitisation projects with no pathway to revenue, repayment or investment readiness are usually a weaker fit.

Geographical Scope / Eligibility: Depends on the individual fund or investor. Some operate nationally, others across Europe or internationally. Eligibility is generally determined by mission fit, impact thesis, business model, scalability or replicability, and evidence of impact potential, rather than through standard public calls.

Funding Mechanism Funding is provided through private capital raised from foundations, institutional investors, family offices, corporates, development finance actors or philanthropic sources. In some cases, impact funds are structured as blended vehicles combining public, private and philanthropic capital. In Europe, the wider impact investment market is increasingly connected to public-private leverage instruments and ecosystem support structures.

How to access it: Through direct outreach to impact funds, investor networks, social enterprise accelerators, ecosystem intermediaries, impact investment events, and mission-aligned venture support programmes.

When to use it

✓ When the venture combines financial sustainability with clear social, cultural or environmental impact

✓ When the project goes beyond simple digitisation and creates broader value through access, inclusion, regeneration, education or sustainable tourism

✓ When a hybrid or mission-driven model needs more flexible capital than mainstream VC usually provides

✓ Especially relevant for cultural-tech, access-to-culture initiatives, heritage-led regeneration, creative economy ventures, sustainable tourism models, and digital heritage platforms with measurable public benefit

Typical access points: Impact investment is commonly accessed through impact-finance networks, specialised funds, accelerators, foundations with investment vehicles, public-private platforms and intermediaries supporting impact measurement and investment readiness

7. Philanthropic and Mission-Driven Funding

Philanthropic Foundations

Level: Private / philanthropic finance
Type of support: Philanthropic support. This may take the form of grants, prizes, fellowships, challenge funding, programme support, seed funding, technical assistance, capacity-building, research support, or in some cases recoverable grants and hybrid philanthropic instruments. Some foundations also combine financial support with mentoring, networking, visibility or strategic accompaniment.
Objective: Philanthropic foundations are independent private entities that allocate funding in line with their own mission, thematic priorities, governance structure, and eligibility rules. They may operate at local, national, European or international level, and can include family foundations, corporate foundations, community foundations, and large international grant-making organisations.
Philanthropic foundations aim to **support initiatives that generate public value and contribute to social, cultural, educational or environmental goals**. In the context of cultural heritage and tourism, they can be particularly relevant for projects that preserve, interpret or activate heritage in ways that strengthen access, inclusion, community participation, education, sustainability, intercultural dialogue, or local development. They are especially useful where the project's primary value lies in its mission and public benefit rather than in its capacity to generate financial returns.
Target beneficiaries: Nonprofit organisations, foundations, associations, cultural institutions, museums, heritage organisations, universities, research centres, NGOs, community-based organisations, and in some cases social enterprises or public-private partnerships.
Commercial ventures with primarily profit-driven objectives and limited public-benefit rationale are usually a weaker fit, unless the foundation explicitly supports social enterprise, innovation or blended models.
Geographical Scope / Eligibility: Depends on the individual foundation. Some operate only in specific territories or communities, while others fund nationally, across Europe or internationally. Eligibility is generally determined by thematic fit, legal status, mission alignment, expected social or cultural value, and implementation capacity, rather than through standardised public programme rules.
Funding mechanism: Funding is provided from private philanthropic endowments, corporate giving structures, family wealth, charitable trusts, or mission-driven capital. Support is usually non-repayable, although some foundations also experiment with catalytic or blended approaches where appropriate. Calls may be open, invitation-based, rolling, thematic, or linked to specific strategic programmes.
How to access it: Through open calls for proposals, targeted programmes, direct outreach to relevant foundations, philanthropic networks, cultural and social innovation intermediaries, or partnership-building with mission-aligned organisations. In some cases, access depends on prior relationship-building, geographic fit, or alignment with a foundation's strategic priorities.
When to use it
✓ When the project delivers strong cultural, social, educational or community value
✓ When the initiative is not yet investment-ready and does not rely on a commercial return

model

✓ When heritage, digitalisation or tourism activities are designed primarily for public benefit, inclusion, access or experimentation

✓ Especially relevant for pilots, nonprofit-led initiatives, collaborative cultural projects, access-to-culture actions, educational heritage platforms, and community-based tourism or heritage activation models

Typical access points: Philanthropic support is commonly accessed through open calls, thematic programmes, challenge funds, direct invitations, partnerships with intermediary organisations, foundation networks and mission-aligned outreach. Applicants should verify each foundation's current priorities, geographical scope, eligible beneficiary types and application procedures before approaching it. Many foundations do not accept unsolicited applications and may work through invitation-only processes or established partners.

Corporate Philanthropy / Corporate Foundations / CSR Funding

Level: Private / philanthropic and corporate social investment.

Type of support: Philanthropic or mission-aligned corporate support. This may take the form of grants, sponsorship, donations, challenge prizes, in-kind contributions, pro bono services, equipment, digital tools, employee volunteering, skills-based support, technical assistance, or strategic partnerships. In some cases, corporate actors may also provide mentoring, visibility, market access, or co-development opportunities alongside financial support.

Objective: Corporate philanthropy, corporate foundations and CSR funding are managed by individual companies or company-linked foundations, each with its own governance model, thematic priorities, territorial focus and eligibility rules. Support may be delivered directly by a company, through a dedicated corporate foundation, or via CSR / ESG / sustainability programmes.

Corporate philanthropy and CSR funding **aim to generate positive social, cultural, educational or environmental impact while also reflecting the company's values, sustainability commitments, community engagement strategy or reputational priorities**. In the context of cultural heritage and tourism, this can make them particularly relevant for projects that promote digital inclusion, access to culture, education, place-based regeneration, sustainability, skills development, responsible tourism, or innovation with visible public benefit. They are especially useful where a project aligns both with public-interest goals and with a company's CSR, ESG, territorial or sectoral priorities.

Target beneficiaries: Nonprofit organisations, cultural institutions, museums, heritage organisations, foundations, associations, local development actors, educational organisations, NGOs, community-based initiatives, and in some cases social enterprises, public-private partnerships, or SMEs involved in mission-driven projects.

Purely commercial projects with limited public-benefit rationale are usually a weaker fit, unless they form part of a broader partnership with strong educational, social, environmental or territorial impact.

Geographical Scope / Eligibility: Depends on the individual company or corporate foundation. Some support projects only in locations where the company operates, while others fund nationally, across Europe or internationally. Eligibility is generally shaped by thematic fit, legal status, visibility potential, alignment with corporate values, expected community impact, and implementation capacity. Some schemes operate through open calls, while others are invitation-based or partnership-driven.

Funding mechanism: Support is provided through corporate giving budgets, company foundations, CSR or ESG programmes, brand partnership budgets, community investment schemes, or strategic philanthropy mechanisms. Funding is usually non-repayable, although support may also include in-kind resources, services, infrastructure, staff time, technology, or joint programme delivery. In some cases, support is linked to specific campaigns, territorial programmes or annual priority areas.
How to access it: Through open calls from corporate foundations, CSR or ESG programmes, direct outreach to companies with aligned priorities, local partnership-building, sponsorship negotiations, philanthropic networks, sector intermediaries, chambers of commerce, or innovation and sustainability platforms. In many cases, successful access depends on demonstrating clear mission fit, strong visibility potential, and credible social, cultural or territorial impact.
When to use it
✓ When the project creates clear public value and also aligns with corporate CSR, ESG, education, inclusion or sustainability priorities
✓ When the initiative offers strong partnership potential, visibility, community engagement or place-based impact
✓ When digital heritage, culture or tourism activities can be framed as contributing to access, education, sustainability, local regeneration or responsible innovation
✓ Especially relevant for educational platforms, digital access initiatives, heritage activation projects, sustainable tourism pilots, community-based cultural programmes, and projects with strong territorial or social visibility
Typical access points: Corporate philanthropic support may be accessed through corporate foundations, CSR programmes, community-investment schemes, employee-giving initiatives, open calls, strategic partnerships and direct engagement with sustainability, public affairs or community-relations teams.

Patronage / Sponsorship

Level: Private / philanthropic, reputational and partnership-based support
Type of support: Non-repayable support. This may take the form of financial sponsorship, patronage contributions, donations, event support, in-kind contributions, communication support, venue or equipment provision, co-branding, promotional partnerships, or visibility-oriented collaborations. In some cases, patronage may also include long-term institutional support or contributions linked to specific restoration, exhibition, interpretation, education or audience engagement activities.
Objective: Patronage and sponsorship are forms of private non-repayable support provided by companies, foundations or individual donors to cultural or heritage initiatives. While patronage is often philanthropic or mission-driven, sponsorship typically involves brand visibility, communication partnerships or promotional benefits for the supporting actor
Patronage and sponsorship **aim to support projects with cultural, social, territorial or reputational value,** while also generating visibility, association with positive public outcomes, stakeholder engagement, or brand enhancement for the supporting actor. In the context of cultural heritage and tourism, they are particularly relevant for projects that offer strong storytelling potential, public visibility, community resonance, educational value, or symbolic association with heritage, innovation, sustainability or place-based identity. They are especially useful where a project can attract external support through its public appeal,

symbolic relevance, or communication potential, even if it does not fit investment or grant-finance logic.

Target beneficiaries: Cultural institutions, museums, heritage organisations, foundations, event organisers, destination management actors, tourism and local development organisations, associations, nonprofits, and in some cases public-private partnerships or SMEs involved in cultural or territorial initiatives.

Projects with limited visibility, weak public narrative, or low partnership value may be a weaker fit unless they are linked to particularly high symbolic, territorial or institutional relevance.

Geographical Scope / Eligibility: Depends on the individual sponsor or patron. Some operate only locally or in territories where they have a presence, while others support projects nationally or internationally. Eligibility is generally determined by thematic alignment, reputational fit, audience reach, territorial relevance, communication value, and the project's capacity to deliver visible results and partnership benefits.

Funding mechanism: Support is provided through sponsorship budgets, cultural patronage programmes, brand partnership agreements, private donations, event support mechanisms, or company-led cultural engagement initiatives. Funding is usually non-repayable and may be granted as a one-off contribution, annual support, campaign-linked partnership, or multi-year collaboration. In-kind support, communication assets and visibility packages are also common.

How to access it: Through direct outreach to potential sponsors or patrons, sponsorship proposals, partnership-building with aligned companies or foundations, local business networks, chambers of commerce, tourism boards, cultural intermediaries, fundraising campaigns, or institutional relationship-building. Access often depends on presenting a compelling value proposition combining public benefit with visibility, reputation or territorial impact for the supporting actor.

When to use it

✓ When the project has strong public visibility, symbolic value or storytelling potential

✓ When heritage, tourism or digital culture activities can attract brand association, local support or reputational interest

✓ When the initiative offers clear communication, audience engagement or place-based partnership opportunities

✓ Especially relevant for exhibitions, festivals, heritage activation campaigns, interpretation projects, visitor experiences, community events, digital storytelling initiatives, and tourism-related heritage promotion actions

Typical access points: Patronage and sponsorship are generally accessed through direct outreach to companies, foundations, donors, local businesses, sectoral associations and individual patrons. Opportunities may also arise through sponsorship packages, cultural partnership programmes, fundraising campaigns, membership schemes and relationship-building with potential supporters.

Patronage is primarily motivated by cultural, civic or philanthropic support, while sponsorship normally involves a defined exchange of value, such as visibility, branding, audience access, hospitality or reputational benefits.

8. Alternative and Complementary Financing

Alternative and complementary financing can be particularly relevant for digital heritage and cultural tourism projects that do not fully fit traditional public funding or private investment logic. These mechanisms are especially useful for testing market interest, mobilising communities, financing specific project components, supporting early-stage ventures, or complementing grants and institutional funding.

For the purposes of this guide, the most relevant models are grouped into two broad categories: **mainstream crowdfunding mechanisms** and **emerging digital financing models**.

Crowdfunding schemes and the issuance/use of crypto-assets may be subject to specific regulatory frameworks. In the EU, there are harmonised rules for European crowdfunding service providers, as well as a regulatory framework for markets in crypto-assets (MiCA). It is recommended to operate only with authorised providers, assess compliance risks, and seek specialised legal and regulatory advice when considering models based on tokens or digital assets.

Mainstream crowdfunding mechanisms

Reward-based crowdfunding

Supporters contribute funds in exchange for non-financial rewards, such as early access, exclusive experiences, cultural products, memberships, or project-related benefits.

This model is particularly suitable for:

- digital heritage products and experiences
- interpretive tools, apps and immersive content
- community-facing cultural initiatives
- launch campaigns for creative or tourism-related services

Typical access points: Reward-based crowdfunding is accessed through specialised crowdfunding platforms that allow project promoters to present a campaign, define a funding target and offer non-financial rewards to supporters. Platform conditions, fees, payment models and geographical availability should be checked before launching a campaign. A successful campaign generally requires a strong communication strategy, an existing or reachable community, realistic rewards and sufficient capacity to deliver them.

Donation-based crowdfunding

Individuals contribute money without expecting financial return. This is especially relevant for projects with strong public, cultural, educational or community value.

This model is particularly suitable for:

- heritage preservation and restoration campaigns
- community heritage initiatives
- nonprofit digital access projects
- educational and inclusion-oriented cultural actions

Typical access points: Donation-based crowdfunding is usually accessed through general or mission-oriented fundraising platforms, community campaigns, nonprofit networks and direct digital fundraising tools. The most suitable route depends on the project's legal status, target community, geographical reach and public-benefit purpose.

Equity crowdfunding
Investors provide capital in exchange for shares or equity in a company or venture. This model is more relevant for startups and scalable business models than for nonprofit or purely public-interest projects.
This model is particularly suitable for:

- tourism-tech and heritage-tech startups
- digital platforms with growth potential
- ventures combining innovation and revenue generation
- early-stage businesses seeking market-based capital

Typical access points: Equity crowdfunding is accessed through authorised investment platforms that connect eligible companies with individual or professional investors. Companies are normally required to provide financial information, ownership terms, risk disclosures, valuation assumptions and a credible growth strategy. This route involves the transfer of equity or ownership rights and is therefore mainly appropriate for companies with a scalable business model and the capacity to manage investor relations and regulatory obligations.

Lending crowdfunding / crowdlending
Funds are provided as repayable loans, sometimes with interest, under agreed repayment conditions.
This model is particularly suitable for:

- organisations with predictable revenue streams
- projects with repayment capacity
- SMEs or social ventures needing complementary finance
- investment in specific assets, equipment or implementation phases

Typical access points: Crowdlending is accessed through authorised lending platforms that assess the borrower, structure the loan and facilitate investment by multiple lenders. Conditions may include interest, repayment schedules, guarantees, platform fees and credit-risk assessments. It is only suitable where the borrower has sufficient repayment capacity and predictable future income.

Emerging and experimental digital financing models

Security Token Offerings (STOs)
STOs are token-based fundraising models linked to regulated financial or asset-backed structures. They may be relevant for highly structured, investment-ready cases, but they are generally more complex and less accessible than mainstream crowdfunding.
They may be considered only where:

- the project has strong legal and financial structuring capacity
- there is a clear investment logic
- the initiative involves tokenisable assets or revenue-linked structures
- specialist legal and regulatory advice is available

Typical access points: Security-token structures normally require specialised legal, financial and technological intermediaries, including authorised issuance platforms, investment-service providers, custodians and regulatory advisers.

NFT-based fundraising and digital collectibles
NFT-related models can sometimes be used to support fundraising, digital patronage, membership communities, or monetisation of digital cultural content. However, they should be treated as niche and experimental rather than as mainstream fundraising tools.
They may be considered only where:

- the digital asset has genuine cultural or creative value
- the project includes a strong audience engagement strategy
- the use of NFTs adds real utility, membership, or participation value
- reputational, legal and market risks are carefully assessed

Typical access points: NFT-based initiatives may be developed through digital-asset marketplaces or specialised technical providers. However, platform selection should follow a careful assessment of legal compliance, intellectual-property rights, environmental implications, audience demand, cybersecurity, fees and reputational risk.

Alternative financing mechanisms should be assessed on a case-by-case basis. Their suitability depends on the legal status of the organisation, the nature of the project, the expected financial return or public benefit, the capacity to manage a campaign or investor relationship, and the applicable legal and regulatory framework. The inclusion of a financing model in this guide does not imply that it is suitable for every cultural heritage project.