

ESA Phi-Lab Netherlands Info Session – August 8, 2025

Summary

1. Programme Overview

- ESA Phi-LabNet: Part of ESA's Innovate commercialisation programme alongside ESA BICs and Brokers/Ambassadors.
- Mission: Support groundbreaking research and innovation with high potential for commercialisation, bridging the gap between research and market.
- Thematic Focus: Earth Observation (EO), Positioning/Navigation/Timing (PNT), Secure Satellite Communications, and common enabling capabilities — with emphasis on building a safe and resilient society.

2. ESA Phi-Lab Netherlands

- Operators: NL Space Campus & SBIC Noordwijk, Supported by NSO (national delegate).
- Support Offered:
 - Academic & commercial mentoring.
 - Access to facilities, workspace, and equipment.
 - Seed funding of €200k per project.
 - Access to partner networks, ESA programmes, and events.
 - Networking and potential fellowship visits to other Phi-Labs.
- Project Duration: 1–2 years (max 2).
- Outcomes Expected: E.g. Product, service, Publications, IP transfer, or startup formation.

3. Eligibility & Selection

- Applicants: Legal entities registered at ESA or consortia of these (e.g. companies, universities, research institutions).
- Requirements:
 - Strong space connection.
 - Research-driven disruptive innovation with commercial potential.
 - Benefits to the Dutch space ecosystem
- Not Suitable For: Pure research without market focus, long-term PhD projects, projects outside thematic scope, pure product and business development

4. Funding & Co-funding Rules

- Seed Funding: €200k from ESA; own contribution required (percentage depends on type of applying entity).
- Contribution Rates:
 - SMEs: minimum 20% own contribution.
 - Universities/Research Orgs: 100% covered if ≤30% of total budget; above that, co-funding of 50% applies.
 - Large companies: maximum 50% ESA funding.

- Eligible Costs: Staff time, subcontracting, data/IP purchase, equipment rental, travel, accommodation, etc (detailed in the call for applications).

5. Application Process

- Steps:
 - Check eligibility criteria and call documents.
 - Optionally submit an Idea Outline by 12 Sept for feedback.
 - Prepare full proposal (research, market potential, work plan, budget).
 - Submit by 20 Oct, 13:00 CET via email or submission page.
- Evaluation:
 - Tender Opening Board → eligibility check for the submission.
 - Tender Evaluation Board (ESA, NSO, NL Space Campus + experts) → presentation, Q&A, scoring.
 - Decision & feedback by early December; contract negotiations follow.

6. Tips for Strong Proposals

- Engage early with the Phi-Lab team.
- Show high commercial potential and disruption.
- Build a strong consortium with both scientific and commercial expertise.
- Include end users and/or letters of interest.
- Align with Netherland's long term space strategy and contribute actively to the ecosystem.
- Combine funding sources for stronger, larger projects.

Questions and Answers (Q&A)

Q: Can we combine public funding sources for co-funding, such as using Horizon Europe funding?

A: You need to be cautious. EU rules prohibit using the same funds for overlapping activities (double funding). You can't directly transfer Horizon Europe funds into this project. However, if part of your Horizon project aligns with this proposal, you might count working hours as an in-kind contribution.

Q: Are there any rules regarding where eligible costs can be spent – for example, if we use contractors within the EU?

A: The Netherlands Space Office prefers that funds are spent within the Netherlands as much as possible. In few cases, if the required services and expertise are not available in the Netherlands, the contractor may agree with the ESA Phi-Lab Netherlands and NSO on allocating limited amount of the allowable costs outside the Netherlands and still preferably in EU.

Q: Is there a limit to how many proposals we can submit, or can we contribute to multiple ones?

A: In this evaluation round, you can only submit **one** proposal as a main applicant. However, you **can contribute** to other proposals.

Q: Can the proposal be submitted by universities like TU Delft or Leiden University?

A: Yes, universities can participate as main or subcontractors. Universities may have rules and regulations of the applicants they support as PI. E.g. Some universities (or faculties) may only support applications submitted by permanent staff.

Q: Is it mandatory to register a company before submitting the full application?

A: " All applicants must be legal entities registered with ESA. Individuals cannot apply directly. If a new company is planned but not yet incorporated, the application can be made through an eligible legal entity, such as a university, provided that entity employs the individual(s).

Q: If a project is a collaboration between a company and a university, how does that affect the co-funding arrangement?

A: The amount of Co-funding will depend on the budget allocation between the (sub)-contractors. If the budget allocated to the university doesn't exceed the 30% of the total project budget no co-funding is required from the university. If the amount exceeds the 30% for the exceeding amount, 50% co-funding is expected from the university. The co-funding required from the company will depend on their status (SME: 20%, non-SME: 50%). In summary It depends on how the budget and tasks are divided. Each entity must follow its own applicable rules.

Q: Can a research organization (such as NLR or a university) support and submit multiple proposals with different topics and departments?

A: Yes. If the applicants can demonstrate that the proposed projects are distinct and are clearly separate on scope, funding, team composition, deliverables, etc., then multiple applications can be submitted.

Q: The FAQ on the website states that the staff costs are capped at 50% of the total budget; Is that still valid for the current call?

A: No, current call has no such cap. The FAQ on the website is now updated accordingly.

Q: We are an SME scaling up across Europe using additional EO data. What kind of 'scaling-up' costs are eligible, and which are not?

A: If you're only trying to expand the market for an existing product, that's not a project fit for the Phi-Lab programme and associated costs such as payment to local partners will not be eligible. However, if you are developing something new (e.g., using new data like from Sentinel-4), and need local data for validation of the proposed method and data integration, that can be eligible under technology development. Costs must relate to research and innovation, not pure market expansion.

Q: What about travel or partnering with local actors abroad to test the concept in a specific area?

A: Costs for research-related validation (like travel, fieldwork, or local data) may be eligible. But funding for foreign partners to adopt your product is generally **not** supported.

Q: Can you elaborate on what "safety and resilience" means under the umbrella theme "Commercialization of downstream data and technology for a safe and resilient society"?

A: we refer to communities, nations and societies that are well-prepared to prevent, withstand, respond to and recover from threats and challenges. This entails climate resilience, natural disasters, or defence against geopolitical threats ensuring civil security.

Q: What qualifies as innovative or market-disruptive?

A: Difficult to define and summarise "**Innovation**" but in a very abstract way it could refer to introducing developing new technology, methods, approach rather than replicating existing workflows and assemblies. And **Market disruption** would refer to what changes customer behaviour or market structure significantly. Submitted application should convince the TEB that the solution meets these criteria.

Q: Can you give an example of a successful project?

A: The project selected in the previous evaluation round proposes an innovative approach for detecting hard-to-track orbital objects, improving space safety, linked to PNT and SatCom with developments that could also assist EO missions and applications. But this is only one example and should not be taken as a blueprint defining what makes a project successful.