

Introduction

ELEVATE is a European capacity-building project funded by the **EIT HEI Initiative**, aimed at strengthening entrepreneurship and innovation capabilities within Higher Education Institutions and their surrounding ecosystems.

The project supports the development of interdisciplinary, knowledge-intensive entrepreneurial initiatives across the domains of Food, Biomedicine and Health, Artificial Intelligence (AI), and Creative and Cultural Industries, through training, mentoring, ecosystem engagement and acceleration activities implemented at regional and European level.

Article 1 – Definition of the initiative and purpose of the call

The present Call aims to select **up to 12 innovative projects or early-stage startups** to participate in the **ELEVATE Acceleration Programme**, developed within the framework of the ELEVATE project.

The Acceleration Programme is designed to support interdisciplinary, knowledge-intensive entrepreneurial initiatives operating in the following strategic domains:

- Food and Food Biotechnology
- Biomedicine and Health
- Artificial Intelligence (AI)
- Creative and Cultural Industries

The objective of the Call is to identify high-potential teams and early-stage startups (up to 1 year) and provide them with a structured acceleration pathway, including mentoring, business development support, access to innovation ecosystems and investors, and opportunities for visibility at European level.

Participation in the ELEVATE Acceleration Programme is free of charge.

Article 2 – The ELEVATE Acceleration Programme

The **ELEVATE Acceleration Programme** is an intensive acceleration pathway with a duration of **12 weeks**, aimed at supporting the development, validation and scaling of innovative entrepreneurial projects and early-stage startups.

The Programme provides selected teams with:

- an entrepreneurship training programme (30 hours), covering key business management topics such as business planning, business models, organisation, AI and digital strategy, finance and intellectual property protection;
- structured mentoring (40 hours) by experienced professionals from industry, entrepreneurship and innovation ecosystems;
- access to the international network of the ELEVATE consortium and its partners, including Higher Education Institutions, industry stakeholders, investors and innovation actors;
- opportunities for networking, visibility and pitching to a wider international audience.

As part of the Programme, selected teams will participate in a **one-week in-person immersion activity** in Italy (one member per team face to face, others online), including workshops, training sessions and visits to relevant ecosystem players.

Selected teams may also be invited to take part in **additional training or networking activities** organised within the ELEVATE project (such as summer schools or thematic events). Participation in such activities is optional and does not constitute a mandatory requirement of the Acceleration Programme.

At the end of the Programme, teams will present their projects during a **final public pitching event**, attended by international stakeholders, investors and innovation actors.

Article 3 – Organisational Structure

1. The bodies involved in the implementation of the **ELEVATE Acceleration Programme** are:
 - o the **Selection Committee**;
 - o the **Mentors**.
2. The **Selection Committee** is appointed by the ELEVATE project partners responsible for the implementation of the Acceleration Programme and is composed of experts with experience in entrepreneurship, innovation, industry and investment in the number of one member for each ELEVATE Partner.

The Selection Committee is responsible for:

- o assessing the applications submitted under the present Call;
- o selecting the projects or startups admitted to the Acceleration Programme;
- o evaluating the progress and outcomes of the Programme.

External experts may be involved in an advisory capacity, without voting rights.

3. The **Mentors** are selected among entrepreneurs, managers, professionals, investors and innovation experts, and provide guidance and support to the selected teams throughout the Acceleration Programme.

Mentoring activities may cover, inter alia, business development, market validation, access to funding, legal and regulatory aspects, and go-to-market strategies. **Due to the international nature of the ELEVATE project, mentoring activities may be delivered online, depending on the most suitable mentor–team matching as assessed by the Programme organisers.**

Article 4 – Eligibility Criteria

1. The Call is open to **entrepreneurial teams, innovative projects and early-stage startups**, provided the group must consist of at least two people, and that they meet the eligibility requirements set out in this Article. The call is open only to members of the ELEVATE consortium and its spin-offs.
2. Applicants must operate in at least one of the following strategic domains:

- Food and Food Biotechnology
 - Biomedicine and Health
 - Artificial Intelligence (AI)
 - Creative and Cultural Industries
3. At the time of application, applicants must meet **at least one** of the following conditions:
- be an **entrepreneurial project** with a clearly identified team and a concrete business development perspective; or
 - be an **early-stage startup** established for no more than **one (1) year**.
4. The applicants are responsible, in all legal terms, for the proposal originality and authorship.
5. Applications may be submitted by:
- natural persons;
 - legally established entities, including startups or spin-offs.
6. Each applicant may submit **one application only**. In particular:
- the same individual, group or legal entity may not apply with more than one project or startup;
 - projects or startups applying as a team must designate a **team leader**, who will act as the sole contact person for all communications related to the Call.
7. Participation in the Acceleration Programme requires **active involvement in its core activities**.
8. Projects or startups that have already received funding or have participated in other incubation, acceleration or support programmes are eligible, provided that this information is clearly disclosed in the application.
9. Failure to comply with one or more of the eligibility requirements set out in this Article, or the provision of false, misleading or incomplete information, shall result in exclusion from the selection process, at the sole discretion of the Selection Committee.

Article 5 – Application Procedure

1. Applications must be submitted exclusively in accordance with the modalities and within the deadline specified in Article 9 of the present Call.
2. Applicants are required to complete the application process by submitting the information and documentation requested in the Call, which may include, inter alia:
 - a description of the project or startup;
 - information on the team members;
 - a pitch deck or equivalent presentation material;

- any additional documents specified by the Programme organisers.
3. All applications must be submitted **in English**.
 4. Each application shall be submitted by the **team leader**, who will act as the sole contact person for all communications related to the Call and the selection process.
 5. Applicants are responsible for submission of reliable and truthful information.
 6. Applicants warrant that all legal and institutional permissions, if any are required, have been granted prior to submission. The applicants are responsible for any infringement of third -party proprietary rights, intellectual property rights, industrial property rights, personal or moral rights or any other rights, including without limitation, copyright, trademark, patent, trade secret or confidentiality obligations, or otherwise violate applicable laws.
 7. Applications that are incomplete, submitted after the deadline, or not compliant with the requirements of the present Call shall not be admitted to the selection process.
 8. The Programme organisers reserve the right to request clarifications, integrations or additional information from applicants for the purpose of completing the evaluation process.

No fees are necessary to apply and to be supported by the ELEVATE Program.

Article 6 – Selection Process and Evaluation Criteria

1. The selection of projects or startups admitted to the ELEVATE Acceleration Programme shall be carried out by the **Selection Committee**, on the basis of the applications submitted in accordance with the present Call.
2. The selection process may be organised in one or more stages and may include, where deemed appropriate by the Programme organisers:
 - an initial eligibility and compliance check on all information provided by the applicants;
 - a qualitative evaluation of the applications;
 - interviews or pitching sessions with shortlisted applicants, conducted online or in person.
3. The Selection Committee shall assess the applications with full autonomy and discretion, on the basis of the following evaluation criteria:
 - relevance and alignment with the thematic domains and objectives of the ELEVATE project;
 - degree of innovation and scientific basis of the proposed solution;
 - market potential, scalability and sustainability of the proposed business model;
 - technical feasibility and maturity of the proposed solution;
 - adequacy and complementarity of the entrepreneurial team’s skills and competencies;
 - quality, clarity and completeness of the information provided in the application.

4. Following the evaluation process, the Selection Committee shall select **up to 12 projects or startups** to be admitted to the Acceleration Programme.
5. The decisions of the Selection Committee are final and not subject to appeal. The outcomes of the selection process shall be communicated to applicants through the modalities indicated by the Programme organisers.
6. The Selection Committee reserves the right not to assign all available places in the Acceleration Programme, should the applications received not meet the required quality standards.
7. Final decisions will be communicated electronically in written form to all applicants. The selected teams will be publicly announced at the ELEVATE project website (<https://inspire-elevate.eu>) and social media.

Article 7 – Acceleration Programme Activities

1. Once the teams are selected, they will be admitted to the **ELEVATE Acceleration Programme** and will have access to a structured set of support activities, including:

- an **entrepreneurship training programme** (70% attendance mandatory);
- a **mentorship programme**, delivered by international, experienced professionals from industry, entrepreneurship and innovation ecosystems;
- **meetings and networking activities** with the academic, industrial and financial community, aimed at fostering the exchange of ideas and the development of strategic relationships.

2. Before the one-week in-person immersion activity in Italy, the selected teams shall be required to submit a **Business Plan** of at least 40 pages for their project, which could serve as an indicative structure and will form the basis for the final pitching event.

The Business Plan shall include:

- a **qualitative section**, describing in detail the organisation of the business, its strategy, market positioning and operational structure;
- a **quantitative section**, addressing the main financial and economic aspects of the project.

Specifics for the drafting of the Business Plan will be given in due time

3. The activities of the Acceleration Programme may be delivered **in person and/or online**, depending on the nature of the activity and organisational requirements.

4. Participation in the Acceleration Programme requires active involvement in its core activities. To successfully complete the Programme, selected teams will be required to attend training and mentoring sessions, and the in-person immersion week, in accordance with the conditions communicated by the Programme organisers.

5. Failure to attend the programme activities may result in exclusion from the Programme and ineligibility for final awards. 6. Participants consent to be contacted by the ELEVATE Team or one of its representatives for follow-up activities related to this call.

Article 8 – Awards

At the conclusion of the ELEVATE Acceleration Programme, the participating teams must present their projects and the results achieved during the Programme at the **ELEVATE Final Event**, addressed to an international audience including businesses, investors and other entrepreneurs.

Following the final pitching event, the **winning teams** will be awarded the prizes as follows:

- **one prize of €5,000** for each of the following target sectors:
 - Food;
 - Biomedicine and Health;
 - Artificial Intelligence (AI);
 - Creative and Cultural Industries;
- **one additional prize for Women Entrepreneurs**, awarded in line with the objectives of gender balance and inclusion promoted by the ELEVATE project.

In addition to the monetary awards, one member of each prize-winning team will have the opportunity to participate in a **tour to a top accelerator programme in an European country** selected by the Programme organisers.

The allocation of awards shall be based on the outcomes of the Acceleration Programme and the final pitching event, according to the evaluation carried out by the Selection Committee or by a dedicated jury appointed for this purpose.

The awarding of any prize is conditional upon full compliance with the Programme requirements, including attendance obligations, timely submission of required deliverables and to the final decisions of the competent evaluation bodies.

Article 9 – Timeline and Operational Arrangements

1. The timeline of the Call and of the ELEVATE Acceleration Programme is defined as follows:
 - **Opening date of the Call:** 18/05/2026;
 - **Opening date for submissions:** 18/05/2026;
 - **Deadline for submission of applications:** 19/06/2026;
 - **Communication of selection results:** 15/07/2026;
 - **Start of the Acceleration Programme:** 14/09/2026;
 - **End of the Acceleration Programme and ELEVATE Final Event:** 04/12/2026.
2. **Applications must be submitted in accordance with the modalities specified in the present Call.**

3. Applications shall be submitted by email to info@inspire-elevate.eu, using the programme [application form](#).
4. All communications relating to the Call, including requests for clarification, notifications to applicants and publication of results, shall be carried out using the contact details provided in the application and/or through the official communication channels of the ELEVATE project.
5. Requests for information or clarification concerning the present Call may be submitted by email to **info@inspire-elevate.eu**.
6. The Programme organisers reserve the right to modify the timeline and operational arrangements set out in this Article, provided that adequate notice is given through the official communication channels of the ELEVATE project.

Article 10 – Data Protection

1. For the purposes of Regulation (EU) 2016/679 (GDPR), the Programme organisers shall act as data controllers. Personal data shall be processed exclusively for the management, implementation and evaluation of the Acceleration Programme, as described in the present Call.
2. Participants agree that personal data including, but not limited to, name, email address and phone number may be collected, processed, stored and otherwise used by the ELEVATE Team, or any party authorized by them for the purposes of conducting and administering the Program, including its partners.
3. The provision of personal data is mandatory for the purposes of verifying eligibility requirements and participation in the selection process. Failure to provide such data will result in exclusion from the Call.

Article 11 – Confidentiality of Information

1. The utmost confidentiality of the information provided by applicants during the activities related to the present Call and the Acceleration Programme is guaranteed.
2. All technological, scientific and business information provided by applicants shall be treated with strict confidentiality and shall be used exclusively for:
 - (i) evaluation of applications;
 - (ii) implementation of the Acceleration Programme;
 - (iii) follow-up and impact assessment activities of the ELEVATE project
3. The entrepreneurial projects and related materials remain the property of the applicants.
4. All individuals involved in the various phases of the selection process and the Acceleration Programme, including members of the bodies referred to in Article 3, shall be required to sign a confidentiality agreement concerning the information provided by participants in relation to their entrepreneurial ideas and projects.

5. Participants accept and agree that all documents and information provided by the ELEVATE Acceleration Programme are confidential and cannot be copied and/or reproduced and in any form provided to a third party.

Article 12 – Participants’ Obligations

1. Participation in the present Call and in the ELEVATE Acceleration Programme implies **full and unconditional acceptance** of all provisions contained in this document.

Selected teams commit to:

- actively participate in all mandatory activities;
- comply with agreed deliverables and deadlines;
- provide accurate and truthful information;
- collaborate in monitoring and evaluation activities;
- contribute to communication and dissemination actions related to the Programme.

Article 13 – Intellectual Property and Copyright

1. The ELEVATE Team and the participants agree that the information will be exclusively used for (i) evaluation of participant’s proposal, (ii) general market analysis purposes and (iii) follow -up activities.
2. Participation in the Programme does not imply any transfer or licensing of intellectual property rights to the Programme organisers or its partners.
3. All projects, business ideas, materials and documentation submitted within the framework of the present Call remain the property of their authors, who may protect them through the safeguards provided by applicable law.
4. The members of the bodies referred to in Article 3 shall not be held liable for any disputes that may arise concerning the originality, authorship or ownership of the submitted materials, or for any third-party claims or limitations affecting such materials.

Article 14 - Amendments to the Rules

The Programme organisers reserve the right to amend these Rules and Regulations at any time, provided that such changes are communicated through the official communication channels of the ELEVATE Project.

Article 15 – Disqualification and Termination

The Programme organisers reserve the right to exclude any participant who, after prior warning where appropriate, violates these Rules and Regulations, provides false or misleading information, fails to comply with Programme obligations, or engages in conduct that is detrimental to the reputation or objectives of the ELEVATE project.

Article 16 – Visibility and EU Acknowledgement

Participants agree to acknowledge the support of the ELEVATE project and the EIT HEI Initiative in all public communications, materials and presentations related to activities developed within the



framework of the Programme, in accordance with the branding guidelines provided by the Programme organisers.

Article 17 – Gender Balance and Inclusion

The ELEVATE Acceleration Programme promotes gender balance, equal opportunities and inclusivity. The selection and implementation of activities shall aim to ensure fair representation and non-discrimination on the basis of gender, ethnicity, disability, age, religion or sexual orientation.

Article 18 – Visa and Travel Costs

Any costs related to travel, accommodation, visas or insurance incurred by participants in order to attend Programme activities shall normally be borne by the participants themselves, unless explicitly stated otherwise by the Programme organisers.

Article 19 – Code of Conduct

All participants are expected to behave in a professional, respectful and inclusive manner throughout the duration of the Programme. Any form of harassment, discrimination or inappropriate conduct may result in exclusion from the Programme, in accordance with Article 15.