Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

2nd Open Call for Pilots

Open date for proposals: 13 October 2022 at 13:00 CEST (Brussels Time)

Deadline: 15 December 2022 at 13:00 CET (Brussels Time)

Version 1

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement 101017142.

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1. What is StairwAI?

StairwAI (*Stairway to AI: Ease the Engagement of Low-Tech users to the AI-on-Demand platform through AI*) is an EU-funded project targeting low-tech users, which have to focus on **solving a specific challenge** using a set of AI tools and resources that are available as a service layer of the AI4EU platform. This will be achieved through a new service layer enriching the functionalities of the on-demand platform.

2. Which organisations take part in the StairwAI project?

Project coordinator: Universita di Bologna (UNIBO).
Partners: Istituto Nazionale di Fisica Nucleare, Bonseyes, EGI, Tilde, FundingBox, Huawei, Thales, Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya, University College Cork, Technische Universiteit Eindhoven.

3. What is the AI4EU Platform and how is it connected to StairwAI?

The AI4EU Platform brings the AI Ecosystem stakeholders and AI resources together in one dedicated place (research, products, solutions). The AI4EU Platform acts as the one-stop-shop for anyone looking for AI knowledge, technology, services, software, and experts.
In StairwAI, SMEs selected within the Open Call for Pilots will be testing services available on the AI4EU Platform, especially matchmaking with AI experts and AI resources that can support pilots implementation.

4. Why should you apply?

- Selected companies will receive a maximum of €60.000, that includes:
  1) fixed lump-sum: up to € 26 000,
  2) vouchers: up to € 10 000 to access HW Resources and up to € 24 000 for AI experts (mentors and system integrators).
- During the Support Program, you will be supported by Technical and Business Experts and you will get access to specialized tools.
- Your business will level up in terms of AI maturity.
- You will improve key processes in your company, thanks to which you will become more competitive.

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5. Who can apply?

Low-tech SMEs (registered as a legal entity) established in:

- **The Member States of the European Union and its Overseas Countries and Territories (OCT) or**
- **Associated Countries to H2020,**
- The United Kingdom.

6. What is an SME?

An SME will be considered as such if it complies with the European Commission's Recommendation 2003/361/EC. In summary, the criteria defining an SME are:

➔ Headcount in Annual Work Unit (AWU) less than 250;
➔ Annual turnover less or equal to €50 million OR annual balance sheet total less or equal to €43 million.

Note that the figures of partners and linked enterprises should also be considered as stated in the SME user guide. For detailed information check EU recommendation: https://ec.europa.eu/growth/smes/business-friendly-environment/sme-definition_en.

7. How will we check your SME status?

Before signing the Sub-grant agreement, we are going to verify your SME status. More specifically, we will request you to provide the following documentation:

1. Status information of the beneficiaries:
2. SMEs checklist. In the event you declare being non-autonomous: the balance sheet and profit and loss account (with annexes) for the last period for upstream and downstream organizations.
3. Financial information. It includes the headcount (AWU), balance, profit & loss accounts of the latest closed financial year and the relation, upstream and downstream, of any linked or partner company.
4. Legal existence. Company Register, Official Journal or similar, showing the name of the organisation, the legal address and registration number and, if applicable, a copy of a document proving VAT registration (in case the VAT number does not show on the registration extract or its equivalent).

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5. In cases where either the number of employees or the ownership is not clearly identified: any other supporting document which demonstrates headcount and ownership such as payroll details, annual reports, national regional, association records, etc.
6. Bank identification form
7. Information about participation in other acceleration programmes and/or other H2020 grants received.

8. What is a low-tech SME?

For the purposes of StairwAI Open Call, the low-tech SMEs are considered to be companies (SMEs) with AI Readiness Index (AIRI) below or equal to 2.0 (classified as AI Unaware or AI Aware).
For StairwAI applicants the AI Readiness Index (AIRI) will be calculated based on methodology and survey developed by AI SINGAPORE and adjusted to the StairwAI project.

9. How are we going to measure your AI maturity (AIRI)?

We will measure your AIRI based on the 6 questions included in the application form.
In the section "AI Maturity of Applicant" you will find 6 single-choice questions with 4 possible answers to choose from.
The questions refer to the understanding of AI and related skills, AI business spanning, AI Governance, Infrastructure and Data.
We will score your answers to those questions from 1 to 4 and calculate the average score, which enables us to classify you as:

- AI Unaware (average score less than 1)
- AI Aware (average score from 1 to 2)
- AI Ready (average score above 2 to 2,5)
- AI Competent (average score above 2,5)

If your average score is below or equal to 2.0, we will consider you as a low-tech company.
If you are AI Unaware, don't worry! This is a project for you!

10. What are the challenge areas?

SMEs have to focus on **solving a specific challenge** using a set of AI tools and resources that are available as a service layer of the AI4EU platform:

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- **Challenge 1: Logistic and supply chains**
- **Challenge 2: Human resources**
- **Challenge 3: Management of data generated by the Internet of things (IoT)**
- **Challenge 4: Manufacturing Industry**
- **Challenge 5: Environmental issues**
- **Challenge 6: Cyber Security**
- **Challenge 7: Health**
- **Challenge 8: Education**
- **Challenge 9: Energy**
- **Challenge 10: Art-driven solution and art production**
- **Challenge 11: Public services**
- **Challenge 12: Other**

Detailed description you will find in the Guide for Applicants, Section 3.2.

11. Who is the ideal applicant for StairwAI?

Low-tech SME as it was mentioned above.
You have a tool, service process or solution but it's not technologically advanced and you want to develop it on the basis of artificial intelligence and cooperate with European experts from this domain.
You shouldn't be advanced in AI but it's good if you precisely know your goal.

High TRL is not necessary. It is expected that the TRL (Technology Readiness Level) reached by the end of the project will be TRL7 and beyond. At the same time, the initial TRL level should allow for the final TRL level 7 or beyond to be reached during the support programme and under the provided funding.

12. What is a TRL?

TRL - Technology Readiness Level- Technology Readiness Levels (TRLs) are indicators of the maturity level of particular technologies. This measurement system provides a common understanding of technology status and addresses the entire innovation chain.
There are nine technology readiness levels; TRL 1 being the lowest and TRL 9 the highest. In our project, we refer to Annex G of the General Annexes to the Work Programme 2016/17 for a full description of TRLs.

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It is expected that the TRL (Technology Readiness Level) reached by the end of the project will be TRL7 and beyond. At the same time, the initial TRL level should allow for the final TRL level 7 or beyond to be reached during the support programme and under the provided funding.

In this project, for the application stage, we consider the TRL level of your solution without the AI component. During the project, you will develop your solution by including AI component(s) with support from StairwAI Consortium, AI resources and AI experts. Remember, we do not expect you to be an AI expert!

13. What happens if I do not submit my application within the deadline?

We do not accept applications after the deadline. We strongly encourage you not to wait until the last minute to submit your proposal. Failure of meeting the submission deadline for any reason, including extenuating circumstances, will result in the rejection of the proposal.
Remember: the deadline to submit the project is on 15 December 2022 at 13:00 CET (Brussels Time).

14. How long does it take to fill in the application?

It shouldn't take more than 1-2 working days as an average. Take into account that specific character limits are set in each field of the online application form, so we encourage you to keep your proposal focused on the requested information, keeping in mind the StairwAI concept and the requirements gathered in the Guide for Applicants for this call. We also recommend you to start the submission process quite in advance before the deadline in order to avoid last-minute problems.

15. Can a company submit two project ideas?

No. If more than one proposal submitted by the same applicant is identified, only the last proposal which has been edited will be evaluated.

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16. Can I apply if I have received FSTP grants from other projects before?

Yes, it is possible to apply to other open calls. The only point that you should pay attention to if you are selected (funded) for multiple EU projects is the double funding rule. That means that you have to be able to confirm that funding received from one EU project will not cover the same costs/tasks which were already funded by other EU projects. Please note that SMEs engaged in other EU funded acceleration/support programmes will have to prove that they have enough resources to be able to implement and complete StairwAI support program tasks (in case of being selected).

17. Can I receive support in the 2nd OC if I was a beneficiary of the 1st OC?

No, if you have already been awarded in the 1st StairwAI Support Program you are not allowed to receive any kind of support (financial and non-financial) from other StairwAI open calls, since the limits of funding received is a maximum of 60 000 EUR per company.

18. Can I be selected to the 2nd OC if I was validated as a voucher supplier?

You will most likely not be selected if you have been validated as a voucher supplier. This is because being a voucher supplier means that you are a company with relevant experience in AI, and as we commented in question 5, the ideal applicant for StairwAI is a low-tech SME.

19. Are applicants required to include the budget plan in the application?

Details about the budget are not required on the application level. The detailed budget planned for execution will be requested from selected SMEs, at the beginning of the Support Programme in Individual Mentoring Plan.

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20. Will I be able to modify my proposal after submission?

Yes, you can EDIT your application after you submit it before the deadline, as many times as you wish.

21. What are the selection criteria?

Each proposal will be evaluated by external evaluators with 3 main awarding criteria Excellence, Impact and Implementation. Detailed description you will find in the Guide for Applicants, Section 4.3

22. What type of support is available for preparing the proposal?

The 'Guide for Applicants' is the main reference document. It provides detailed information about the requirements of the evaluation and selection process, and the Support Program offered by StairwAI. If you encounter any technical problems while filling in the application form, contact info.stairwai@fundingbox.com and we will do our best to help you.

23. How to write a proposal that convinces evaluators?

Make sure you do not leave any information out of your proposal. Be specific and provide precise answers to the questions in the application form. You can find all the information you need in the Guide for Applicants.

24. Who are the external evaluators?

Evaluators are external, independent experts with proven experience in AI and the particular challenges to be evaluated. The panel of external experts is selected and invited by the StairwAI consortium. Each evaluator signs a code of conduct and confidentiality clause before they start the evaluation of the proposals.

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25. What are the different evaluation phases and the expected schedule?

The table below presents the indicative dates in which each of the evaluation phases will end and the number of expected applicants that would go through to the next phase.

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Phase	Time	Approximate Date	Number of applicants passing to the Next Phase
Eligibility Check & Pre-Scoring	5 days	16/12/2022 – 21/12/2022	Approx. 60
External Evaluation	Approx. 5 weeks	22/12/2022 – 29/01/2023	Up to 60
Consensus Meeting	1 day	Mid-February	Up to 60
Online Jury Day	2 days	First half of March 2023	Up to 14
Finalist Communication	1 day	1 week after Jury Day	Up to 14
Legal Check (including SME status check)	Approx. 4 weeks	March-April 2023	Up to 14

Table 1. Phases of selection

26. What are the pre-scoring criteria?

- Dedication to the project (12,5% weight / up to 10 points),
- Team skills (12,5% weight / up to 10 points),
- Proved experience in the target market (12,5% weight / up to 10 points),
- Progress or traction during last 3 years (12,5% weight / up to 10 points),
- Scalability of the solution (12,5% weight / up to 10 points),
- Market opportunity (12,5% weight / up to 10 points),
- TRL level of your solution (12,5% weight / up to 10 points),
- Technology Level of your business (12,5% weight / up to 10 points).

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27. What happens during the online Jury Day?

If your project is among the finalists, you will be invited to an online Jury Day, where you will have the opportunity to pitch your project in front of the StairwAI JURY composed of the Selection Committee (plus optionally, some Advisory Members).
Before Jury Day you can receive specific questions formulated by the Selection Committee that should be addressed during your pitch. Not attending Jury Day will automatically imply the exclusion of the proposal from the selection process.
After Jury Day, the StairwAI JURY will select the final beneficiaries. More on this you will find in the Guide for Applicants, Section 4.5.

28. What is a conflict of interest?

Conflict of interest may occur, if there are capital or personal connections between two or more entities (Applicant, Consortium partner or any person involved in the selection process), in particular, it should be understood as:

• any ownership relations - ownership of shares, financial links and economic connections - like joint venture, holding, joint participation, silent partner. E.g. Applicant's entity owns shares in the Consortium partner company or the Consortium partner company owns shares in the Applicant's company (it also refers to the Applicant's partners/linked enterprises). As economic connection we can understand exclusive licenses, sale agreements if they concern product or solution covered by your application etc;

• family and personal relationships, in particular: marriage, kinship, a relationship of affinity to the second degree in a straight line or lateral line, adoption, custody or guardianship or actual life and other close personal ties binding the Applicant and Consortium partner or any person involved in the selection process (it refers also to employees, shareholders, members of the management body, members of the board, managers, subcontractors etc.) – e.g. person representing the Consortium partner company has family/personal ties with anyone representing the Applicant company;

• the existence of material, especially financial relationships (such as the receipt by a person involved in the selection process from Applicant any significant gifts, donations, future contracts or employment, etc;

• relationships based on employment, cooperation or existing civil contract between the Consortium partners and people involved in the Applicant's structure, including managerial or supervisory functions, position in managing or supervising bodies. E.g. Director of the Consortium partner is involved in the management bodies of an Applicant company; the

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Applicant's employees involved in the Project are employed or contracted by the Consortium partner company etc;

• remaining in a legal or factual relationship that may give rise to justified doubts as to the impartiality of the people involved in the selection process (expert/evaluator/employee/member of the management bodies of any of the Consortium partner etc).

The reasons set forth above may result in a conflict of interest if they occur at the time of an action or have occurred in the past (during the last 2 years before the action starts). Time limits do not apply to family and personal relationships.

Remember that the concept of conflict of interest should be understood widely, so if you have any doubts about the conflict of Interest please consult it with our team.

All cases of conflict of interest will be assessed on a case by case basis.

29. Can project partners help me with proposal writing?

No, project partners engaged in the StairwAI consortium cannot be involved in the writing of applications.

30. What are the payment conditions?

Before releasing the respective tranches of the payment, your performance must be evaluated and approved by the Mentoring Committee and validated by the Selection Committee during dedicated Milestone Reviews. You will find all the necessary information in the Guide for Applicants, section 5 "Our Support Programme and Payment Arrangements".

31. What is the ethical check?

Remember that all finalists will be carefully verified by the 'Ethics Experts', to see if there are any ethical issues raised in the proposal. If so, an 'Ethics Summary Report' will be produced and attached to the FSTP agreement and 'Ethics Committee' will be established to supervise and monitor the ethical concerns during the project's implementation.

This stage is necessary to get the first tranche of payment.

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During the ethical check, we encourage you to follow the Ethics Guidelines for Trustworthy AI and ALTAI (Assessment List for Trustworthy Artificial Intelligence) tool.

32. What is ALTAI

The Assessment List for Trustworthy Artificial Intelligence (ALTAI), is a list, and also a practical tool which intends to facilitate that businesses and organisations may self-assess the trustworthiness of the AI systems that they are developing.

The AI HLEG (High-Level Expert Group on AI) was appointed by the European Commission to produce the Ethics Guidelines for Trustworthy AI, which intends to go towards developing AI with a human-centric approach. The concept of trustworthiness applied to AI was proposed by this Expert Group, and it revolves around seven key requirements:

- Human Agency and Oversight;
- Technical Robustness and Safety;
- Privacy and Data Governance;
- Transparency;
- Diversity, Non-discrimination and Fairness;
- Environmental and Societal well-being; and
- Accountability.

ALTAI comes as a way to make the Ethics Guidelines into a practical tool, making it more accessible for AI developers and deployers. This allows those who wish to implement the requirements identified by the AI HLEG to be autonomous in their process through the use of a list (PDF) or a web based tool.

33. What is the payment schedule?

The selected grantees will receive up to €60,000 in the following four instalments:

Instalment	When?	Max. lump sum	Max. voucher	Maximum total amount
1.	M1 (after validation of IMP)	€ 2 500	0	€ 2 500

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2.	End of Stage 1 (after validation of Feasibility Plan)	€ 7 500	0	€ 7 500
3.	Beginning of Stage 2	0	€ 8 500	€ 8 500
4.	M6 (after solution demonstration)	€ 16 000	€ 25 500	€ 41 500
	TOTAL	**€ 26 000**	**€ 34 000**	**€ 60 000**

34. What is a lump sum?

The lump sum is a simplified method of settling expenses in projects financed from Horizon 2020 funds. It means that you are not required to present strictly defined accounting documents to prove the cost incurred (e.g. invoices), but you are obliged to demonstrate the implementation of the project in line with the set up milestones for it. Simply speaking, it means that we will assess your progress and quality of your work, during the Final Review, not your accountancy. The milestones (objectives and results) must be defined in the application form and (if necessary) elaborated before signing the Sub Grant Agreement. The lump sum does not release you from the obligation to collect documentation to confirm the costs under fiscal regulation.

35. What is a voucher scheme?

A voucher scheme enables you to pay for services required during your Pilot implementation. In SaitrwAI you can allocate €34,000 for (HPC) HW resources providers and for AI experts, mentors and system integrators.

Those services will be contracted based on the agreements made directly between you and one of the HW resources providers and/or AI experts. Please be aware that you can use vouchers to pay only for services delivered by providers and AI experts selected from the pool of providers and AI experts validated by StairwAI.

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36. What is the % of co-financing of project costs by StairwAI?

StairwAI is distributing financial support in the form of vouchers and a lump sum. The lump sum may cover up to 100% (up to € 26 000) of your costs related to the project implementation and included in the Individual Mentoring Plan (elaborated at the beginning of the Support Program). So, in case your costs will not be higher than € 26 000 the lump sum will cover 100 % of your costs related to the project implementation.

37. Who are HPC (HW) resources providers and AI Experts?

High-Performance Computing providers are entities legally established in any of the EU member states and H2020 Associated Countries that own HPC computing and data resources capable of providing on-demand Access to HPC clouds to third parties.
AI Experts are people or teams (natural persons or legal entities legally established in any of the EU member states and H2020 Associated Countries) capable of supporting the AI development activities required by Pilots, during project executions.
All HPC Cloud providers and AI Experts that will be engaged in the Pilots' execution through the voucher scheme have to be validated by the StariwAI team through the Expression of Interest call available through: https://stairwai.fundingbox.com/

38. What services does StairwAI offer in the Support Program?

During the project, you will be supported by:

- **Technical Mentor**,
- **Business Mentor**,
- **Experts in AI** (mentors and system integrators),
- **HW resources** to support you during deploying your pilot,
- AI resources and tools available on the AI4EU Platform (**AI on Demand Platform)**.

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39. How will StairwAI monitor the progress of the SMEs during the project?

The 'Mentoring Committee' will evaluate the performance of selected SMEs at the Milestone Review (established every time a payment is due), according to the criteria established at the beginning of the Support Program in the Individual Mentoring Plan.
Each criterion will be scored from 0 to 10 and the weight of each one of these criteria, in the final score, will be as follow:

- Deliverable quality (30%).
- Technical performance indicators (30%).
- Business performance indicators (30%).
- Deadline Compliance (10%).

According to this final score, beneficiaries over the threshold (7 points) will successfully receive the next payment and be candidates to continue the program. Beneficiaries under the threshold, the beneficiaries who haven't reached the threshold (7 points) will be proposed, by the 'Mentoring Committee', as candidates to leave the Program. And, if this decision is finally validated by the 'Selection Committee', they will have to leave the Program and won't receive the next payment.

40. What is the Individual Mentoring Plan?

The Individual Mentoring Plan is a document stating the KPIs and deliverables that should be achieved by the SME during the Support Program duration and the resources along with the appropriate budget committed to the project.

41. Is any accountability required on the way the funds have been used, e. g. invoices and other financial documents? Are there any specific restrictions on how the funds are utilized?

The FSTP beneficiaries will receive a fixed lump sum of up to € 26 000 and vouchers up to € 34 000.
The lump sum is a simplified method that means that the FSTP recipient is not required to present accounting documents like invoices, timesheets, etc, to prove that the cost was actually incurred. However, StairwAI will assess your progress and quality of your work during Interim

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Reviews, not your accountancy. In this sense, we will ask you to demonstrate the implementation of the project in line with the milestones set. In any case, the lump sum methodology does not release you from the obligation to collect documentation to confirm the costs under fiscal regulations. Please bear in mind that by participating in the StairwAI support programme, receiving the grant and signing the Sub-grant Agreement you will also be responsible towards the competent tax authorities, and the EC audit bodies such as the European Court of Auditors (ECA) and the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF).

42. How can we help you?

If you have extra questions regarding our Open Call process you can send us a message to info.stairwai@fundingbox.com

In case of any technical issues or problems, please include the following information in your message:

- your username, telephone number and your email address;
- details of the specific problem (error messages you encountered, bugs descriptions, i.e. if a dropdown list isn't working, etc.); and
- screenshots of the problem.

43. How will the matchmaking process between SME, AI experts and HWC providers be made?

The matchmaking will be done using the new service layer developed by the StairwAI consortium, based on your project description and the field of expertise of the AI experts and HPC providers. As a result of this process, the experts and HPC providers who fit the best to your project will be identified. You will be free to decide if you would like to cooperate with experts and HPC providers proposed by the matchmaking tool or you prefer to work with other voucher providers from the list of validated AI experts and HPC providers.

44. Is it possible for SME to decide with whom (which AI experts) to cooperate during the pilot implementation?

Yes, SME can select the voucher provider by themselves, the only requirement is that voucher providers (AI expert or HPC provider) must be selected from the list of validated voucher providers. The validation process is continuously open for AI experts: https://ai-talents.fundingbox.com and for HPC providers: https://hpc.fundingbox.com.

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45. Can I work with a developer that I already know from past cooperation?

Yes, as long as this developer is validated by StairwAI as a voucher provider.

46. Where can I find the list of validated voucher providers (AI experts and HPC Providers)?

The list of voucher providers validated by StairwAI will be available for selected companies during the Support Program. In the upcoming months, the list will be also available on the StairwAI project website and on the AI4EU Platform.

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