



SMUS

Global Center of Spatial Methods for Urban Sustainability
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Call for Applications

SMUS Action 3: (Post)Doctoral Programme

Action 3 – STEP THREE – SMUS Postdoctoral Scholarships

Application Deadline **Friday 12 December 2025**

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Postdoctoral and international research collaborations on Wicked Urban Problems

Promoting sustainability in cities and communities, particularly in the Global South, remains a paramount and pressing task. While over 80% of the urban population is currently found in high-income countries, between 50% and 80% is found in upper-middle income countries. The strongest urbanisation processes are currently unfolding in low- and lower-middle income countries. In this context, cities are not only growing exponentially, but are also faced with enormous challenges that must be addressed head-on within a very limited timeframe (Ritchie et al. 2024 [2018]; UNCTD 2023).

To avoid pursuing solutions that end up becoming part of, and thus intensify, the problems causing instability, the notion of “wicked problems”, as set out by Rittel and Webber in their seminal article *Dilemmas in a general theory of planning* (1973) need be revisited and reframed. With the onset of industrialisation, both planning and professionalism were conceived and driven by the principle of efficiency. Planning started consequently to be regarded as a “process of designing problem-solutions” (Rittel and Webber 1973: 158) and implemented according to a cost-effective logic. While the nature of problems could easily be defined and agreed upon during the early stages of the industrial era, allowing those with technical skills to solve them with a simplified end-in-view, problem framing underwent a major redefinition during the 1960s, shifting the focus to the value-laden appraisal of planning actions.

Thus, rather than asking ‘what is to be done’, the issue was whether what was being done was right or not. As a result, planning practice was gauged based on its outcomes and problem statements were seen through valuative frameworks. In time, the paradoxical nature of “defining problems (of knowing what distinguishes an observed condition from a desired condition) and of locating problems (finding where in the complex causal networks the trouble really lies)” became apparent (Rittel and Webber 1973: 159). Likewise, the dilemma to pin down what actions need to be taken to help bridge the gap between *what is* and *what should be* proved as intractable. Hence, the kind of problems standing in the way of promoting urban sustainability are inherently different from the problems scientist and engineers deal with. The problems in the natural and engineering



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sciences are susceptible to be definitively defined, isolated, and solved. In contrast, the problematic dynamics hindering sustainability in cities and communities are inevitably ill-defined and “rely upon elusive political judgement for resolution...not ‘solution’ [for] social problems are never solved. At best they are only re-solved – over and over again” (Rittel and Webber 1973: 160). This solution-resolution divide is what ultimately tells a *tamable* from a *wicked* problem. Besides evading clear definition, wicked problems are characterized for being multi-causal and having various interdependencies; for bringing about unforeseeable consequences that trigger change elsewhere; for being unstable, thereby impeding a priori any solution-targeting to settle them; for their social intricacy that resists one single managerial approach; and for being non-susceptible to reductionism, thus demanding multidimensional and transdisciplinary approaches (Brown 2010: 62-63). Moreover, the resolutions to wicked problems, far from true-or-false, are good-or-bad (Rittel and Webber 1973: 162) and decidedly demand “changes in personal and social behavior, changes that may be strongly resisted or encouraged, according to circumstances” (Brown 2010: 63). To put it another way, “each wicked problem is [...] uniquely grounded in its place and time” and “it is only through critical examination of this **groundedness** that wicked problems can be resolved” (Brown 2010: 63; bold added). Echoing this call to place the attention on the contextual groundedness of wicked problems, and stressing how paradoxical the attainment of urban sustainability is, the notion of **wicked urban problems (WUP)** is put forward to frame and emphasize the singular quality that wicked problems have in urban areas. The exploration of wicked urban problems can be guided by combining transdisciplinary practice and spatial research.

Against this backdrop, this call is open to postdoctoral researchers interested in conducting **spatial and transdisciplinary research** on WUP in collaborative, international contexts. To provide options for both early-stage and advanced postdoctoral researchers, six fellows from SMUS partner universities will receive a scholarship to undertake a research stay of between three and six months at a partner university of their choice. The scholarship is awarded for **writing and delivering a research grant**, with the explicit aim of encouraging the transition towards becoming an independent scientist. Building on the successful experiences of former SMUS postdoctoral fellows, scholarship recipients are encouraged to submit their research grant proposals to funding institutions – host professors have provided invaluable guidance in this regard.



Eligibility

This call is only open to all SMUS partner institutions and their research scholars*. There are two tracks:

- **Track A** is focused on researchers in the initial phase of their post-doctoral academic careers. To qualify for this track, your doctoral dissertation should not be, upon submission of your application, any older than two years. Researchers who are near the completion of their doctorates may also apply.
- **Track B** is aimed at advanced researchers/junior professors/lecturers that want to engage in south-to-south or south-to-north research collaborations.

* In line with the DAAD's diversity and inclusion policy, preference will be given to female scholarship recipients with children. Please see the final section of the call for details.

Important facts:

- The earliest start date of the scholarships is: **1 March 2026.**
- The duration of the scholarship is: **a minimum of 3 and a maximum of 6 months*.**
- The latest completion date of the scholarships is: **31 October 2026.**
- Expected outcomes/deliverables: **A completed and submitted grant research proposal** to a recognized grant-giving body + **A report in the form of a reflexive exercise**** on the experience of completing the research stay at the respective SMUS partner university.
- Host institution of the research stay: **Any one SMUS partner university***.** Please note that it is the sole responsibility of the candidate to find a host and establish the conditions of their research stay, such as consultation, access to resources like the library, working desk and the internet, and participation in seminars. The SMUS center does not get involved in any way, except to answer any questions the potential host may have.

* It is not possible to change the duration of a scholarship after it has been awarded. All scholarship recipients must commit to the funding period for which they applied.

** This is intended as a more substantial means of assessing the experience than "typical" research reports, in which completed tasks are merely indexed. Completing and submitting the reflective exercises is compulsory, and they will be featured on the SMUS website.

*** See Annex I. SMUS partner universities and scholarship amounts per country.

Financing

The scholarship covers living expenses and should allow the recipient to work full-time on the expected outcomes and deliverables. The scholarship includes:

- A round-trip flight ticket to the host university.
- A monthly scholarship sum of:





The scholarship amount will vary according to the country in which the SMUS partner university chosen for the research stay is located. As the DAAD establishes fixed sums based on World Bank income level classifications, there is no distinction between Tracks A and B. Please refer to Annex I. SMUS partner universities and scholarship amounts per country.

The scholarship amount for research stays to be completed at any of the institutions within the Berlin University Alliance (BUA) – Technische Universität Berlin, Freie Universität Berlin, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, and Charité – Universitätsmedizin Berlin – is determined as follows:

- **Track A:** Early-stage researchers who come to Berlin for a minimum of three months will receive a monthly scholarship of:
 - > €2.000 to cover accommodation, health and liability insurance costs, local travel and living expenses. **DAAD regulations stipulate that if the research stay is longer than three months, the monthly stipend will be €1.300 per month for the entire duration of the research stay.** In addition to the €1.300 monthly scholarship, researchers staying in Berlin for longer than 3 months will receive a monthly lump sum payment of 145€ for health insurance costs.
- **Track B:** Advanced senior who come to Berlin for a minimum of three months will receive a monthly scholarship of:
 - > €2.150 to cover accommodation, health and liability insurance costs, local travel and living expenses. **DAAD regulations stipulate that if the research stay is longer than three months, the monthly stipend will be €1.300 per month for the entire duration of the research stay.** In addition to the €1.300 monthly scholarship, researchers staying in Berlin for longer than 3 months will receive a monthly lump sum payment of 145€ for health insurance costs.
- All scholarship applicants can claim a sum of up to €150 for visa fees, necessary vaccinations/tests and/or international money transfer. Please note that DAAD regulations require proof of expenditure, so receipts/invoices, etc. must be submitted for these expenses to be reimbursed.

Please note that any additional income earned during the scholarship period must be reported to Technische Universität Berlin administration. **According to DAAD regulations, earnings above or equivalent to 556€ per month will be deducted from the monthly scholarship payment.**

Deadline for application

Friday 12 December 2025 at 23:59 hrs. Applications received thereafter will not be considered.





Timeline

Review process	15 – 17 December 2025
Meeting of the academic selection committee	17 December 2025
Notification to scholarship holders	18 December 2025
Earliest start of scholarship*	1 March 2026
Latest ending of the scholarship	31 October 2026

* When deciding on the start date of the research stay, and thus the start date of the scholarship, it is important to consider visa requirements and procedures. For instance, the time it takes to obtain a visa varies according to the destination country and the relevant consulate issuing the visa. Likewise, finding suitable accommodation can be challenging. It is therefore highly advisable to familiarize yourself with visa requirements and the housing market in the city where you will be travelling to when preparing your application.

Application Procedure

Applications should be submitted digitally as **a single PDF file** to **raffaela.reinboth@tu-berlin.de**. **All applications must be in English and include the following documents:**

1. The completed Application GoogleForm. The link can be found here: <https://forms.gle/hPKzLSR2wvDPd4vF7>. You can update the information provided in Google-Form at any time up until the deadline. It is not necessary to have a Google email address to this end.
2. Curriculum Vitae with academic and professional achievements (max. 4 pages).
3. List of your selected publications.
4. A draft of the research grant proposal indicating topic(s) related to identified Wicked Urban Problems within the targets of the SDG #11 as well as two potential grant givers (max. 1000 words, excl. references).
5. **For Track A*:** Certified copies** of your doctoral degree and/or letter from your supervisor confirming your defense date.
6. **For Track B*:** Copies and transcripts** of your doctoral degree and proof of your advanced researcher, lecturer or professor status.
7. A scan of the information page in your passport.
8. A signed Letter of Invitation from the hosting SMUS partner university. **Do not apply without a letter of invitation of a host institution!** The letter should include the following details:
 - The name of the person that is willing to be your mentor, or collaboration partner during your research stay.
 - A brief description of the host's interest in the applicant's project topic.
 - A declaration from the host that they will provide you with the necessary infrastructure to prepare the research grant proposal. This may include: a desk/working area, library access and other and access to other potential resources. **Please note: A so-called "desk fee" is not covered by the scholarship.**
9. The completed and signed **Application Checklist**.





* Although the distinction between tracks is relevant for determining the amount of the scholarship when the research stay is completed at institutions within the [Berlin University Alliance \(BUA\)](#), it still needs to be specified for application purposes if this is not the case.

** If original degrees, certificates, academic transcripts or other relevant documents are not in English, you must provide an officially certified translation.

Note: Incomplete applications will not be considered!

If you have any questions about the call and/or the application procedure, please contact Dr. Ignacio Castillo Ulloa at: i.castilloulloa@tu-berlin.de

Non-discriminatory selection processes and promoting underprivileged groups, scholars from different disciplines and world regions

Consideration is given to the thematic and professional spectrum of different disciplines and to the representation of the world regions within the SMUS partners network. SMUS follows the non-discriminatory selection processes of DAAD (see DAAD Selection of scholarship holders within the “In-Country/ In-Region Scholarship Programme” March 2020, p.5):

DAAD's goal is to continuously increase the participation of less represented (social) groups in our programmes, as we are convinced that diversity and inclusion characterise universities that are particularly high performing. The scholarship programme therefore aims to increase the participation of less strongly represented target groups and the diversity of scholarship holders. For this very reason it is particularly important that the selection processes are carried out without discrimination. Particular care must be taken not to disadvantage applicants with disabilities, chronic illnesses, or other social aspects of disadvantage. The applicants have the possibility – if they wish – to provide information in the application form about disadvantages they have suffered during their studies or in their research due to their disability, chronic illness or other disadvantage (e.g. longer duration of studies due to disability or childcare, necessity to work, etc.). (...)

In the context of gender equality, we would like to point out that DAAD gives preference to female applicants if they are equally qualified. To adhere to and promote the non-discriminatory DAAD selection of the scholarship holders' procedure, SMUS will seek to ensure diversity and inclusion in awarding the scholarships. We will include candidates of different career stages from diverse world regions, social and economic backgrounds, and a range of social sciences, engineering, architecture and planning disciplines.

References quoted

- Brown, V.A. (2010). Collective inquiry and its wicked problems. In: Brown, V.A., Harris, J.A. and Russell, J.Y. (eds) *Tackling wicked problems: Through the transdisciplinary imagination*. London and Washington, DC: earthscan, pp. 61-83.
- Ritchie, H., Samborska, V. and Roser, M. (2024 [2018]). Urbanization. Published online at [OurWorldInData.org](https://ourworldindata.org).
- Rittel, H. and Webber, M. (1973). Dilemmas in a general theory of planning. *Policy Sciences* 4(2): 155-169.
- United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTD) (2023). *Handbook of statistics 2023*. New York: United Nations Publications.





Annex I. SMUS partner universities and scholarship amounts per country

SMUS Partner University	Country	Scholarship amount (€)*
SS. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje	North Macedonia	700
MISR International University	Egypt	600
Université Hassan II Ain Chock	Morocco	600
University of Tehran	Iran	700
University of Botswana	Botswana	700
University of Ghana	Ghana	600
University of Malawi	Malawi	500
Namibia University of Science and Technology	Namibia	700
University of Nigeria	Nigeria	600
University of Zambia	Zambia	600
Midlands State University	Zimbabwe	600
University of Pretoria	South Africa	700
University of Dar es Salam	Tanzania	600
University of Nairobi	Kenya	600
Technological University of Havana Jose Antonio Echeverría (CUJAE)	Cuba	700
Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana (UAM)	Mexico	700
Universidad Veracruzana	Mexico	700
Universidad de Buenos Aires (UBA)	Argentina	850
Universidade de São Paulo (USP)	Brazil	700
University of Porto Alegre (UFRGS)	Brazil	700
Universidad Nacional de Colombia (Sede Manizales)	Colombia	700
Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú (PUCP)	Peru	700
Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile	Chile	850
Royal University of Bhutan	Bhutan	600
University of Moratuwa	Sri Lanka	600
Indian Institute of Technology – Roorkee	India	600
Indian Institute of Technology – Madras	India	600
Indian Institute of Technology – Kharagpur	India	600
Diponegoro University	Indonesia	700
Chulalongkorn University	Thailand	700
Kazakh National Technical University	Kazakhstan	850
Tongji University	China	700
Southeast University	China	700
Deutsch-Mongolische Hochschule für Rohstoffe und Technologie (DMHT)	Mongolia	700

*Source: Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD) – Aufenthaltsstipendien/-pauschalen für BMZ-Surplace-/Drittlandprogramme in der Projektförderung.