



# AI-BOOST

Delivering the next level of European  
**AI Open competitions**

## APPLY AI STARTUP AND SCALEUP AWARD

GUIDELINES FOR APPLICANTS

(Version 2 – 10/06/2026)



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This guide is intended to support nominated applicants to the Apply AI Startup and Scaleup Award. It explains the objective and scope of the award, the eligibility conditions, the application process, the evaluation methodology, and the follow-up obligations for finalists and winners.

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## 1 AI-BOOST AT A GLANCE

### 1.1 WHAT IS AI-BOOST?

AI-BOOST is an **EU-funded prominent open challenge prize programme** that will serve as a benchmark for the European artificial intelligence (AI) community.

The overall objective of the project is to create and run highly replicable **AI open innovation competitions** that attract the outstanding talent all over the EU and Associated Countries **to drive scientific progress in the major AI Areas**. The project fosters collaboration between the key stakeholders in AI community to define attractive AI challenges with the potential to lead trustworthy and human-centric real-world solutions.

- A **unique sound methodology** capable of defining high social impact AI challenges.
- Highly **replicable and attractive AI open innovation competitions** capable to lead breakthrough technologies and solutions with substantial scientific progress.
- Provide **access to infrastructure and expert knowledge** and promote its adoption through effective training and troubleshooting during the challenges implementation.
- **Attract outstanding talent** and the best research teams to tackle AI challenges.
- **Engage private and public sponsors** capable of providing funding, attractive rewards, and expertise.
- An **AI community** to foster interaction among all relevant stakeholders.

### 1.2 WHO IS AI-BOOST?

AI-BOOST consortium is formed by 7 partners from 6 European countries (Spain, Portugal, Ireland, Belgium, Italy and Slovakia).

**ZABALA** – Zabala Innovation Consulting, S.A.

**Website:** <https://www.zabala.eu/>



**zabala**  
INNOVATION

We are a leading international consultancy firm in innovation strategy and R&D&I financing. Since 1986, we have been supporting our clients in their entrepreneurial drive through the search for financing and the management and promotion of innovation. We work with European Institutions, National and International Public Bodies, SMEs & Startups, Large Companies, Research & Academia

**F6S – F6S Network Ireland Limited**

**Website:** <https://www.f6s.com/>

**Brief description:** F6S is a European based entity that has become the largest Startup/SME community globally with over 1.5 million Startups/SMEs and 2.0 million entrepreneurs. F6S delivers more than €2 billion every year to Startups and SMEs with leading CRM for deal flow, corporate challenges, structured programs, startup services, corporate partnering, recruiting, government grants, and free startup resources.

F6S is the leading platform for application management for commercial, corporate, government, university, and other accelerator programs, helping more than 17.000 such initiatives worldwide.

**CINECA – Cineca Consorzio Interuniversitario**

**Website:** <https://www.cineca.it/>

**Brief description:** CINECA's aim is to accelerate the scientific discovery by providing high performance computing resources, data management, as well as HPC services and expertise. Moreover, CINECA (a not-for-profit Interuniversity Consortium with 117 members) provides technical and scientific services related to high-performance computing to the Italian and European research community.

The staff dedicated to HPC supports the users and offers consultancy in tools and techniques in several disciplinary fields ranging from medicine to meteorology, from seismology to fluid dynamics, to bioinformatics and chemistry, to provide a solid and reliable computing environment for the scientific community.

CINECA is the hosting site for EuroHPC JU pre-exascale system LEONARDO.

**INESC TEC** – Instituto De Engenharia de Sistemas e Computadores, Tecnologia e Ciencia Porto

**Website:** <https://www.inesctec.pt/en>

**Brief description:** INESC TEC is a private non-profit research association, with Public Interest status, dedicated to scientific research and technological development, technology transfer, advanced consulting and training, and pre-incubation of new technology-based companies. The 13 R&D Centres of INESC TEC are structured in four thematic domains – Computer Science, Industrial and Systems Engineering, Networked Intelligent Systems, and Power and Energy.

**UPJS** – Univerzita Pavla Jozefa Safarika V Kosiciach

**PAVOL JOZEF ŠAFÁRIK  
UNIVERSITY  
IN KOŠICE**

**Website:** <https://www.upjs.sk/>

**Brief description:** UPJŠ is a research-based university generating its highest level of scientific knowledge through a vibrant community of young researchers in collaboration with their supervisors. The Faculty of Science is the strongest contributor to the research outputs of the university and key partners in EDIH CASSOVIUM (EDCASS). Within their Law Faculty have experts on AI Legal issues.

**EIT DIGITAL** –EIT Digital

**Website:** <https://28digital.eu/>

**Brief description:** 28DIGITAL is a pan-European multi-stakeholder open-innovation ecosystem of top European corporations, SMEs, startups, universities and research institutes, where students, researchers, engineers, business developers and investors address the technology, talent, skills, business and capital needs of digital entrepreneurship.

28DIGITAL build the next generation of digital ventures, digital products and services, and breed digital entrepreneurial talent, helping business and entrepreneurs to be at the frontier of digital innovation by providing them with technology, talent, and growth support.

## UPF – Universitat Pompeu Fabra



**Website:** [www.upf.edu/web/etic](http://www.upf.edu/web/etic)

**Brief description:** UPF is a public, international and research-intensive university that, in just thirty-two years, has earned a place for itself among the best universities in Europe. UPF is the third Spanish university in the world Top 200 (THE2023). The [Department of Information and Communication Technologies](#) (DTIC) of UPF has an important track record of active participation in EU projects (67 H2020 projects, many ERC grants (21)). DTIC-UPF is the only Spanish university ICT department that has been awarded a second time the *Maria de Maeztu* research excellence seal by the Spanish government.

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## 2 EUROPEAN AI OFFICE

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### 2.1 OVERVIEW OF THE EUROPEAN AI OFFICE

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The European AI Office was established within the European Commission as the foundation for a single AI governance system. It supports the EU approach to AI, playing a key role in implementing the AI Act – especially for general-purpose AI (GPAI) – guaranteeing the health, safety and fundamental rights of people and providing legal certainty to businesses. It also enforces the rules for GPAI models and supports the governance bodies in Member States in their tasks. This is underpinned by the powers given to the Commission by the AI Act, including the ability to conduct evaluations of GPAI models, request information and measures from model providers, and apply sanctions.

The AI Office also promotes an innovative ecosystem of trustworthy AI, to reap the societal and economic benefits. It ensures a strategic, coherent and effective European approach to AI at international level, becoming a global reference point. The European AI Office supports the development and adoption of trustworthy AI solutions, while protecting people against risks.

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### 2.2 STRENGTHENING THE DEVELOPMENT AND USE OF TRUSTWORTHY AI

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The AI Office, in collaboration with relevant public and private actors and the startup community, contributes to fostering trustworthy AI across the EU by:

- Advancing actions and policies to reap the societal and economic benefits of AI across the EU
- Providing advice on best practices and enabling ready-access to AI sandboxes, real-world testing and other European support structures for AI uptake
- Encouraging innovative ecosystems of trustworthy AI to enhance the EU's competitiveness and economic growth
- Aiding the Commission in leveraging the use of transformative AI tools and reinforcing AI literacy

The AI Office actively supports innovators through policies and initiatives that spur growth across the EU:

- The AI Continent action plan<sup>1</sup>, launched in April 2025, explains how to harness the untapped potential of EU researchers and industries, turning EU strengths – such as unparalleled talent and strong traditional industries – into AI accelerators. The plan promotes economic growth and competitiveness in areas such as healthcare, cars, science.

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<sup>1</sup> [AI Continent Action Plan | Shaping Europe's digital future](#)

- The Apply AI Strategy<sup>2</sup>, launched in October 2025, complements the action plan. It aims to boost AI adoption and innovation across Europe, particularly among SMEs. It is designed to enhance the competitiveness of strategic sectors and strengthen the EU's tech sovereignty.

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## 3 THE APPLY AI STARTUP AND SCALEUP AWARD

### 3.1 OBJECTIVE AND SCOPE

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The Apply AI Startup and Scaleup Award aims to recognise innovative European startups and scaleups developing AI solutions in the strategic sectors covered by the Apply AI Strategy<sup>3</sup>. The award is designed to showcase companies that combine strong technological capability with real market traction and clear relevance for Europe. It is intended to highlight AI companies that can become major European success stories while contributing to competitiveness, technological sovereignty and societal benefit.

The eligible strategic sectors are:

- healthcare and pharmaceuticals
- robotics
- manufacturing, engineering and construction
- defence, security and space
- mobility, transport and automotive
- electronic communications
- energy
- climate and environment
- agri-food
- cultural and creative sectors, and media
- public sector

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### 3.2 PRIZE

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Three companies will be selected as award winners. There is no first, second or third ranking among the winners. The three winners will:

- be invited to pitch their solution on the main stage of the Apply AI Summit<sup>4</sup> on 17<sup>th</sup> November 2026;
- be featured on the Apply AI Summit and/or European Commission communication channels, including website, news items and social media;
- benefit from coverage of travel costs to Brussels for up to two representatives of the awarded company, subject to the final reimbursement rules communicated by the organisers;
- receive a trophy and award certificate during the Apply AI Summit;

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<sup>2</sup> [Apply AI Strategy | Shaping Europe's digital future](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Apply AI Strategy | Shaping Europe's digital future](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Apply AI Summit | Shaping Europe's digital future](#)

This award is not structured as a cash prize competition. The main value of the award lies in visibility, recognition, participation in the summit and associated networking opportunities.

### 3.3 OVERALL STRUCTURE OF THE AWARD PROCESS

- **Nomination stage:** National startup associations nominate up to three companies per Member State and invited nominees receive access to the application form.
- **Phase 1 – Pre-screening and evaluation:** Eligible applications are reviewed and scored to identify the Top 10 finalists. A reserve list is also established.
- **Phase 2 – Pitching event and selection of the Top 3:** The Top 10 finalists participate in an online pitching event. Based on the pitch and the application, judges select the three winners and may also maintain a reserve list.
- **Phase 3 – Award announcement:** The winners are publicly announced during the Apply AI Summit.

### 3.4 INDICATIVE TIMELINE

Stage	Indicative timing
Nomination phase launched by the Commission and setup of the application workflow	June 2026
Application period for nominated companies	1 July 2026 to 22 July 2026
Phase 1 evaluation	August to September 2026
Communication of Top 10 finalists	mid-September 2026
Online pitching event for Top 10 finalists	October 2026
Communication to selected winners	October 2026
Award ceremony at the Apply AI Summit	17 November 2026

Change in the timelines. The duration is indicative and any of the above-mentioned timelines may be modified, in case it is necessary. This (these) potential change(s) will be notified in advance to all Participants and communicated to all the interested parties (e.g. press etc.).

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## 4 ELIGIBILITY AND EXCLUSION

### 4.1 TYPES OF BENEFICIARIES

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To be eligible, an applicant must meet all of the following conditions:

- be an innovative startup or scaleup according to the relevant Commission definition;<sup>5</sup>
- be headquartered in the European Union and be directly majority-owned, meaning more than 50% of the capital is held by entities established in the European Union;
- have been nominated by a national startup association in accordance with the nomination procedure;
- have a core business focused on developing AI in one or more of the sectors covered by the Apply AI Strategy;

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### 4.2 ELIGIBLE COUNTRIES

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The award is intended for startups and scaleups established in EU Member States. In addition, the ownership requirement described above must also be satisfied.

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### 4.3 SPECIFIC ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

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In addition to the general eligibility conditions set out above, applicants must comply with the following specific eligibility requirements:

- the application is submitted in English
- the application is submitted before the deadline established in the call documents.

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### 4.4 SPECIFIC EXCLUSION CRITERIA

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Applicants may be excluded if they are in one of the following situations:

- bankruptcy, winding up, court administration, arrangement with creditors, suspension of business activities or similar proceedings;
- breach of obligations relating to taxes or social security contributions;
- grave professional misconduct, including false declarations or attempts to improperly influence the evaluation process;
- fraud, corruption, participation in a criminal organisation, money laundering, terrorism-related offences, child labour or human trafficking;

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<sup>5</sup> • [44501901-103d-4997-a944-726589177050\\_en](#)

- serious deficiencies in complying with obligations under previous EU-funded contracts, grant agreements or decisions, where relevant.

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#### 4.5 GENERAL AWARD TERMS – DELAYS OR CANCELLATION

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The Participants acknowledge and accept that all or part of the awards:

- might not be granted in case of termination of the award;
- might be granted with delays in case of extension of the award;
- might not be granted or granted with delays if the requirements are not fulfilled.

In case the award is terminated for any reason, no further prize(s) shall be awarded. AI-BOOST may cancel the contest or decide not to award the prizes without any obligation to compensate participants, in particular where its objectives cannot be fulfilled.

The prize(s) already awarded at that time may not be revoked.

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## 5 APPLICATION PROCESS

### 5.1 NOMINATION STAGE

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The award is not an open public call without prior filtering. National startup associations first nominate up to three companies per Member State. Only nominated companies are invited to complete the application form. Applicants should therefore understand the process as nomination first, application second.

### 5.2 HOW TO APPLY?

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Invited nominees are invited to register, create a user profile, and complete the full application form and submit them via the F6S platform and accessible through AI-BOOST website: <https://aiboost-project.eu/xxxx/>. All proposals must be fully completed and submitted via F6S platform before the deadline (see section 5.6)

Main steps required:

- Registration via F6S platform
- Dully complete the application from (all mandatory fields must be completed)
- Submit the application form before the deadline (see section 5.6)

### 5.3 WHERE CAN I FIND THE APPLICATION FORM?

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The applications must be built and submitted through the online F6S application form, available via AI-BOOST website: <https://aiboost-project.eu/xxxxxxx/>.

However, an indicative template (word document) can be downloaded from AI-BOOST website to assist applicants in preparing the application form. It is just an example; the actual online application form might differ from this example.

We recommend that applicants submit their proposals well in advance of the specified deadline to ensure that all required fields are completed and that their submissions are accepted.

### 5.4 WHICH INFORMATION MUST BE PROVIDED IN THE APPLICATION FORM?

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The information to be provided in the application is summarized below. However, please see the online application form and the template of the application form for further information.

The application form should be aligned with the award criteria and is expected to include at least the following information:

- company identification data and legal information;
- confirmation of nomination by the relevant national startup association;

- a concise description of the company and its AI solution;
- evidence of technological excellence in the development of AI;
- evidence of impact in the relevant sector, including the problem addressed and tangible benefits delivered;
- evidence of market readiness, scaling achievements, adoption and growth potential;

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### 5.5 IS IT POSSIBLE TO SUBMIT THE DOCUMENTS IN NATIONAL LANGUAGE?

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English is the official language for the Apply AI Startup and Scaleup Award. Submissions done in any other language will not be evaluated. English is also the only official language during the whole execution of the AI-BOOST action.

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### 5.6 WHEN TO SUBMIT THE APPLICATION FORM?

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All sections of the Application Form must be submitted electronically via F6S Platform (accessible via <https://www.f6s.com/xxxxxx>) **before 22<sup>nd</sup> of July 2026, 17:00.00 Brussels time.**

We recommend that applicants **submit their proposals well in advance of the specified deadline** to ensure that all required fields are completed and that their submissions are accepted.

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### 5.7 IS THERE A CONFIRMATION FOR THE SUBMISSION PROCESS?

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All submitted proposals will receive an automatic acknowledgement of receipt of the application from [info@aiboost-project.eu](mailto:info@aiboost-project.eu) , including the number of the proposal, date and hour of the submission. If this mail is not received after submitting a proposal, check the spam box. This e-mail should not be taken as an indication that the proposal is admissible, only that it was submitted.

## 6 EVALUATION AND SELECTION OF APPLICANTS

### 6.1 PHASE 1 – ELIGIBILITY CHECK AND SELECTION OF THE TOP 10

- a) Administrative Check: All submitted applications through the F6S Platform (accessible through AI-BOOSTS website) within the deadline (see section 5.6) will be collected and pass through a first screening and eligibility. The proposals are assessed for any administrative inconsistency and for compliance with the eligibility criteria. This first macroscopic screening will be conducted by appointed members of AI-BOOST consortium.

The proposals must pass the administrative check to proceed to next evaluation steps. Proposals that have been administratively rejected will not proceed further.

- b) Evaluation: Eligible applications will be evaluated by external experts appointed and managed by AI-BOOST in coordination with the European Commission. Each application will be assigned to two evaluators. Each evaluator will receive the full application package and will carry out an individual assessment on the basis of the award criteria defined for the selection of the Top 10.

The evaluation of Phase 1 will be based on the following criteria and weighting:

Criterion	Weight
Excellence in technological development of AI	35%
Impact on the specific strategic sector	35%
Market readiness	30%

These criteria assess whether the company demonstrates strong AI capability, delivers meaningful sectoral impact, shows practical scaling and adoption.

- c) Phase 1 Final Ranking: After completion of the evaluation process, a final ranking list will be established on the basis of the final weighted scores. The 10 highest-ranked companies will be selected as finalists and invited to Phase 2.

Only one company per Member State may be selected for the Top 10. Where more than one company from the same Member State would otherwise qualify, only the highest-ranked application will be retained in the Top 10 and the next highest-ranked eligible application from another Member State will be selected. A reserve list will also be established.

### 6.2 PHASE 2 – PITCHING EVENT AND SELECTION OF THE TOP 3

- a) Invitation to the Pitching Event: The 10 highest-ranked companies selected in Phase 1 will be invited to participate in Phase 2. These finalists will receive the necessary operational information regarding the pitching event, including the format, agenda, timing, technical instructions and any other relevant conditions for participation. AI-BOOST will coordinate the participation of the Top 10 finalists in this phase.

- b) **Evaluation:** The evaluation of Phase 2 will be conducted by a jury of external judges appointed in coordination with the European Commission. Each of the Top 10 finalists will be asked to present its company and solution in an online pitching event. The evaluation will be based on both the pitch and the initial application submitted in Phase 1.

The evaluation of Phase 2 will be based on the following criteria and weighting:

Criterion	Weight
Pitch	20%
Excellence in technological development of AI	30%
Impact on the specific strategic sector	30%
Market readiness	20%

These criteria assess the company's ability to present its solution in a clear and convincing manner, demonstrate strong AI capability, deliver meaningful sectoral impact, show practical scaling and adoption.

- c) **Phase 2 Final Ranking:** After completion of the pitching event, the judges will hold a closed consensus meeting in order to consolidate the results and establish the final ranking of the Top 10 finalists. The three highest-ranked companies will be selected as winners of the Apply AI Startup and Scaleup Award. A reserve list may also be established. The three selected winners will be informed a few days after the pitching event.

### 6.3 PHASE 3 – AWARD ANNOUNCEMENT

- a) **Invitation to the Apply AI Summit:** The three selected winners will be invited to attend the Apply AI Summit, where the official award ceremony will take place. In accordance with the conditions of the award, the winners will receive the corresponding information regarding their participation in the event.
- b) **Public Announcement:** The public announcement of the winners will take place during the Apply AI Summit. At this stage, the three selected companies will be publicly recognised as winners of the Apply AI Startup and Scaleup Award.
- c) **Award Ceremony and Visibility:** During the Apply AI Summit, the winners will receive their trophy and certificate and will benefit from the visibility measures associated with the award, as defined in these Guidelines. This includes, where applicable, presentation on the event website, communication materials, news items and social media channels related to the award.

### 6.4 EVALUATION CRITERIA

The evaluation will be based on the award criteria defined for each phase of the Apply AI Startup and Scaleup Award.

For Phase 1, applications will be assessed against the following criteria:

- **Excellence in technological development of AI:** This criterion evaluates whether the company demonstrates deep technical skills in AI, for instance through cutting-edge

technologies, innovative model design, optimised engineering, or creative problem-solving with data and models.

- **Impact on the specific strategic sector:** This criterion examines how the company's AI solution drives meaningful progress in one of the Apply AI strategic sectors by solving pressing challenges or unlocking new opportunities. It assesses how well the company addresses sector-specific problems, the tangible benefits delivered by the technology, and why the solution stands out in that field.
- **Market-Readiness:** This criterion examines how the company combines true AI innovation with practical, scalable solutions ready for the European market. It also evaluates achieved successes in scaling and market adoption, as well as the company's potential to become a future European unicorn.

For **Phase 2**, the same criteria will apply, together with an additional criterion:

- **Pitch (Phase 2 only):** This criterion evaluates the clarity, quality and persuasiveness of the oral presentation, including the company's ability to explain its AI solution, market proposition, impact and ambition in a concise and convincing manner.

The **scoring process** of the individual evaluators will follow the same general approach as Horizon Europe evaluations. Each applicable criterion will be scored from 0 to 5, with 0.5-point resolution, according to the following scale:

- 0 – Failure – The application fails to address the criterion or cannot be assessed due to missing or incomplete information.
- 1 – Poor – the criterion is inadequately addressed, or there are serious inherent weaknesses.
- 2 – Fair – the application broadly addresses the criterion, but there are significant weaknesses.
- 3 – Good – the application addresses the criterion well, but a number of shortcomings are present.
- 4 – Very good – the application addresses the criterion very well, but a small number of shortcomings are present.
- 5 –Excellent – the application successfully addresses all relevant aspects of the criterion. Any shortcomings are minor.

Each evaluator will score the application with a mark from 0 to 5, with 0.5 resolution, for each award criteria. The scores will be calculated by applying the corresponding weighting to the average marks obtained under each criterion.

**Average marks** will be calculated with two decimals and rounding will be applied according to the following rules:

- values with decimals up to 0.24 will be rounded to the lower integer number;
- values with decimals from 0.25 to 0.74 will be rounded to 0.5;
- values with decimals between 0.75 and 0.99 will be rounded to the higher integer number.



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## 7 COMMUNICATION FLOW WITH APPLICANTS

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### 7.1 IS THERE ANY SUPPORT FOR THE APPLICANTS?

For more information about the Apply AI Startup and Scaleup Award, please check the AI-BOOST website: <https://>.

For additional details concerning the Apply AI Startup and Scaleup Award, any inquiries regarding eligibility criteria, questions about the required information in the Application Form, or if you encounter technical difficulties or issues with the Application Form, please reach out to the AI-BOOST Technical Helpdesk via email at: [info@aiboost-project.eu](mailto:info@aiboost-project.eu)

We also recommend following us on LinkedIn to stay updated on the latest news and events: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/aiboost-project/>.

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### 7.2 HOW ARE THE RESULTS COMMUNICATED TO APPLICANTS?

After the evaluation process is concluded, applicants will be informed by e-mail about the outcome of their application. Overall, applicants should expect the following communication flow:

- All applicants will be informed whether their application has successfully passed the evaluation process.
- The Top 10 finalists will be informed after Phase 1 and will receive the necessary operational information regarding their participation in the online pitching event.
- The three selected winners will be informed a few days after the pitching event, once the final consensus process has been completed.
- The public announcement of the winners will take place during the Apply AI Summit.

In addition, AI-BOOST website may publish the list of winners after the official announcement. Applicants are strongly encouraged to check their Spam inbox regularly.

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### 7.3 CAN APPLICANTS APPEAL A REJECTION?

If, at any stage of the evaluation process, the applicant considers that a mistake has been made or that the evaluators have acted unfairly or have failed to comply with the rules of AI-BOOST first open call, and that her/his interests have been prejudiced as a result; the following appeal procedures are available.

A complaint should be drawn up in English and submitted by email to: [info@aiboost-project.eu](mailto:info@aiboost-project.eu)

Any complaint made should include:

- contact details,
- the subject of the complaint,
- Reference or code of the application form
- information and evidence regarding the alleged breach.

Complaints should also be made within five (calendar) days since the evaluation results are presented to the applicants.

As a standard procedure, the AI-BOOST office will thoroughly investigate any complaints with the aim of reaching a decision to either issue a formal notice or close the case. This process will typically be completed within **twenty days** from the date of receiving the complaint, assuming that all necessary information has been provided by the complainant. In the event that this time frame is exceeded, the AI-BOOST office will promptly notify the complainant via email.