

NATIONAL STEM COMMUNITY FUND 2025

GUIDELINES

THE NATIONAL STEM COMMUNITY FUND PROVIDES FINANCIAL SUPPORT TO LOCAL ORGANISATIONS IN ORDER TO ENABLE THEM TO RUN COMMUNITY-BASED STEM-RELATED PROJECTS.

The National STEM Community Fund is an initiative of the National STEM Engagement Working Group chaired by Esplora Interactive Science Centre on behalf of Xjenza Malta.

The fund focuses on the implementation of participatory projects that are based on Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM), and that primarily address the needs of the local community. The fund celebrates the relevance of science within the community, through support for research, education, communication, citizen engagement and citizen science, via the development of scientific projects, designed and led by actors within the community in collaboration with a STEM professional. Projects are expected to benefit the community, leaving a favourable, lasting impact.

For the purposes of this Fund:

STEM refers to Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics. While different definitions of STEM exist, this Fund focuses on the core of STEM fields: life sciences, physical sciences including earth sciences, health science and environmental science, IT and computer science, engineering and mathematics.

Community-based STEM projects are understood as projects that are developed as part of a collaboration between a STEM professional and a community-based organisation and that are based on the main principles of STEM.

A **community-based organisation** is an existing Malta-based organisation, made up of a group of people who share common interests and values, and that is active within the local community and engages with the local population. This could be a school, a Local Council, an NGO or a Foundation.

A **local community** refers to any established community in Malta or Gozo. This can (but does not have to) be tied to the community's geographical location.

The **Applicant** refers to the organisation or individual (if the latter consider themselves to be representative of a community) applying for this Fund. The Applicant collaborates with a STEM professional to address a specific community need through the project. The project needs to be based on the main principles of one or more of the above-

mentioned STEM fields. The Applicant may partner up with other community-based organisations (partners).

Beneficiaries are applicants who are directly awarded fund money and who sign a Grant Agreement.

A **Project Partner** is any individual or organisation, apart from the STEM professional, who collaborates with the Applicant and is involved in the project from the beginning. Any collaborator whose absence would significantly disrupt the intended core deliverables or outcomes of the project, should be considered to be a project partner.

A **STEM Professional** is a person who can bring along their knowledge, research skills and expertise on the theoretical and practical aspects of STEM that the project could make use of.

A **Letter of Commitment** is a letter written by the STEM professional and any project partners defining their role in the project and distribution of funds (as applicable).

Deliverables are what the Applicant, in collaboration with the STEM professional, will be submitting as tangible outputs/outcomes of their collaborative project.

Examples of tangible **deliverables** include, but are not limited to: workshops, seminars, publications, and outreach activities. Deliverables can also include intangible outcomes such as: empowering communities, fostering skills, and inspiring experimentation and innovation.

1. Main Scope

This Fund aims to bring together community-based organisations and STEM professionals to collaboratively carry out a project that addresses a need in the community.

As indicated in the fund title, the project must be oriented in a STEM field and/or operating through the means of STEM communication, education, public awareness, and citizen science.

Furthermore, the intention of this fund is to make local communities more active in STEM. Citizen science takes place when scientists and citizens work together to meet needs or solve problems. Through citizen science, science can become less of an abstract notion and more of an accessible and applicable tool that decreases the gap between scientists and citizens. This means that an important role of the National STEM Community Fund is to make science more accessible. This Fund ties well with Esplora's vision: to increase public awareness of the fact that we all 'already use scientific reasoning and skills' within our 'daily activities including making science-based choices continuously.'

2. Eligibility Criteria

The Applicant must be a Malta-based individual or organisation who/that is active within a community and engages with the local population. Eligible organisations include:

- Schools up to post-secondary level and Resource Centres
- Local Councils
- NGOs and Foundations
- Museums and Galleries

Other government bodies, private companies and tertiary education providers **cannot** be the Applicant. This, however, does not exclude them from taking part in a project.

Non-Governmental Organisations must be in possession of a valid Voluntary Organisation (VO) number.

3. Funds available and Funding Procedure

For 2025, the total budget for the National STEM Community Fund is €100,000 (including fund management expenses).

The maximum funding per project is €10,000, allocated at the discretion of the independent Evaluation Board.

Payment will be carried out in two instalments: 70 % upon announcement of the awardees, and the remaining 30 % after the submitted Final Report has been evaluated and checked for compliance.

4. Budget

The amount that the Beneficiary is granted is the maximum amount and cannot be increased.

Should Beneficiaries need to re-allocate funds between budget items, they are required to inform Esplora.

Any foreseen expenditure that is ultimately not incurred will be deducted from the final payment of the grant (30 %).

4.1. Eligible Costs

Eligible costs are costs which are strictly related to the project.

These can be:

- Equipment, merchandise or services required for the implementation of the project
- Personnel costs (with timesheets - ref Point 11 below)
- Fee of STEM professional (if applicable)*
- Administrative expenses e.g. consumables
- Travel expenses**
- Advertising and dissemination costs
- Promotional events

* The STEM professional can be VAT exempt but must have a VAT number. If VAT exempt, a fiscal receipt must be submitted with the final report.

**Travel expenses are only eligible if they are indispensable to the implementation of the project.

4.2. Non-Eligible Costs

- Infrastructural costs
- Consultancy fees (the STEM professional is not considered a consultant; the STEM professional may not be involved in the project as the representative of a consultancy firm)
- Expenses that are not clearly identifiable and verifiable, and accordingly substantiated by presentation of original documentation in accordance with the terms and conditions of fiscal legislation
- Expenses that are not incurred during the timeframe allocated to the project
- Expenses that are already covered by another funding organisation/scheme, be it public or private

4.3. Sub-contracting

Outsourcing a particular task to a third-party service provider is acceptable, as long as the cost is not more than 30% of the total fund.

4.4. State Aid

The EU does not allow Governments to grant funding that will distort market competition by favouring certain businesses or service providers - this is called "state aid". The National STEM Community Fund will therefore be awarded in line with the terms and conditions of Commission Regulation EU 2023/2831.

Applicants such as state schools and local councils have no state aid implications because they do not carry out economic activity within the meaning of Article 107 TFEU.

Applicants that are non-public entities and have state-aid implications can be awarded funds under the *de minimis* regulation. The *De Minimis* Regulation stipulates that the

total amount of aid granted shall not exceed €300,000 over any period of three years. Applicants that have state-aid implications will be required to submit a signed *de minimis* declaration form stating that any aid received does not exceed €300,000 during the applicable three-year period.

The *De Minimis* declaration can be downloaded [here](#). Please see Annex 1 for further details.

5. Information Sessions

Two information sessions on 10th and 12th March 2025 will be held to address any questions that potential applicants may have. The sessions will be held online (on Microsoft Teams) and recorded, so that the recordings can be shared online afterwards.

Registration to the information sessions can be done by sending an email to stemengagement.esplora@gov.mt

6. Timeline

Dates*	Activity
10 th March 2025	Online information session about the Fund in English
12 th March 2025	Online information session about the Fund in Maltese
3 rd April 2025	Online Application opens
23 rd May 2025	Deadline for submission of online application
19 th June 2025	Results of Compliance and Evaluation of submitted projects – Tier 1
16 th July 2025	Results of Final Evaluation – Tier 2
31 st July 2025	Press Event, disbursement of first tranche (70%) Development and implementation of the projects
31 st August 2026 (latest)	Deadline for submission of project Final Report
September 2026	Final Report evaluation and compliance check Disbursement of second tranche (30%) will follow

* Dates are subject to change. Any changes will be announced on the Esplora website.

7. Application Process

Applicants are required to apply via the online form on the [Esplora website](#).

Prior to submitting the application, the Applicant must agree with the STEM professional and any Partners on terms related to each of their roles, the distribution of related tasks and responsibilities and the extent of their contribution towards the project's successful implementation and completion. All this should be stated in a Letter of Commitment by the STEM professional (to be uploaded in the online application form).

A Letter of Commitment is also required from any other partners collaborating on the project.

The project should have at least two tangible deliverables.

A budget sheet needs to be filled in at application stage. Download the Budget Template, from the [Esplora website](#). Fill in the second tab in the budget form titled 'NSCF Budget Form', save it as a pdf and upload it with the online application form where indicated. Quotations may be included with the budget sheet.

Kindly note that the Letters of Commitment from the STEM professional and any other project partners, and the budget sheet are required to be submitted at application stage.

After submitting the online application form, Applicants will receive an acknowledgement by email within two to three working days. If you do not receive such a notification, kindly contact us on: stemengagement.esplora@gov.mt

Incompletely filled forms, or applications that do not match the eligibility criteria established in these guidelines will not be considered eligible for further processing towards evaluation.

Late applications will not be accepted.

8. Evaluation and Selection Criteria

All applications will be evaluated on the basis of the following criteria:

8.1. Project Excellence (45 marks)

- Scientific soundness of the project and its methodology. The project must be substantiated with evidence-based research.
- Excellence of project plan.
- Feasibility of the presented budget. All expenses need to be accounted for to the point that the project can start immediately following the first disbursement of the funds (70%).

8.2. Relevance of Project to the Community (35 marks)

- How aptly the project proposes to meet the community needs. The project's defined objectives and outcomes must show that they are relevant to the target audience and that the community needs identified are addressed.
- How well the project can convey the potential of STEM within the community.
- Choice of delivery method(s). How effectively the intended target audience is reached through this method.

8.3. Impact and Legacy of project (20 marks)

- Clarity of the project's aim and the consideration given to both the scientific and social aspects of the project.
- Quality of the methods that will be used to evaluate the impact of the project.
- Engagement of participants in evaluation process.
- Strength of the expected legacy of the project. A clear description of how the project will leave a lasting impact beyond the project's time frame.
- Link to any of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

9. Evaluation and Adjudication Process

Each application will go through an evaluation and adjudication process by an independent Evaluation Board. The Board will be composed of a chairperson and at least two attendant members.

All evaluators will sign a Confidentiality and Conflict of Interest Declaration. When a conflict of interest arises, a replacement evaluator will be appointed.

The evaluation will take place following the submission deadline, according to the “Project Timeline” dates above. Evaluators will first mark each application individually, then meet to reach a consensus on the projects that are to be awarded funding.

The evaluators may approve funding for a project on the condition that some line items in the budget are removed or modified.

9.1. Pass mark

For the project to be considered for funding, the Evaluation Board must give it an average mark of at least 75%. However, projects that are marked between 65% and 75% will be given the opportunity to improve their application in line with the evaluators’ feedback.

In such cases, Esplora on behalf of the Evaluation Board will ask the Applicant for clarifications on any points that brought the overall mark of the project down. The Applicant will then be able to re-submit an updated application. The updated application will be reviewed in the second and final round of evaluations.

9.2. Equally Ranked Projects

In the case of a tie, projects will be evaluated further in terms of the project’s a) environmental sustainability; b) inclusivity and gender balance.

10. Project Monitoring

Beneficiaries will be asked to sign a **Grant Agreement**. In accepting the grant, participants give their consent to Esplora for the publication of the name of the organisation, project title, a brief overview of the project, and the amount of funds awarded to the project.

The first 70 % of the allocated funds will be processed once the contract has been signed. The remaining 30 % will be awarded following submission and approval of the Final Report.

Every two months, the Beneficiary will be asked to provide Esplora with updates on the status of the project.

Beneficiaries of this fund are expected to acknowledge the funding assistance received from Esplora Interactive Science Centre (Xjenza Malta) and the Ministry for Education,

Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation on all digital and physical materials and resources (including purchased resources) pertaining to the project. Logos will be provided by Esplora.

In line with the submitted proposal and the subsequent Grant Agreement, the grant received can only be used for the implementation of the project. Beneficiaries are reminded to abide by their internal procurement regulations and procedures.

Deviations from the submitted Budget Plan will need to be justified.

Should the Beneficiary identify a need to implement certain changes, which in turn affects the nature of the project, and/or occurs past the signing of the agreement, they are required to notify Esplora. **Changes cannot be implemented unless and until approval is granted.**

Esplora may ask the Beneficiary to be present at Esplora Interactive Science Centre (for no more than four hours) to represent their project or organisation at any relevant events being held at Esplora.

Esplora may alter or withdraw a grant if the change in the project is not considered in line with the initial application as approved by the Evaluation Board, or if Esplora deems it has not been informed of the changes in due time.

Any remaining savings/funds within the approved budget may, upon approval by Esplora, be re-allocated towards other areas of the project as long as this stays within the project's original aims and objectives.

The Beneficiary is responsible for ensuring compliance with all relevant legislation, including legislation regulating Voluntary Organisations, if applicable, and VAT registration.

Esplora reserves the right to send representatives for monitoring purposes during any stage of the project implementation.

Esplora reserves the right to consult with the Malta Council for the Voluntary Sector (MCVS) according to the necessary circumstances.

11. Documentation and Submission of Final Report

Throughout the entire implementation of the project, and for the sake of the final report, it is of great importance that the Beneficiary documents the project's progress.

This can be done by means of:

- photos (kindly include at least 5 photos in the final report)
- video material

- social media updates (preferably on an account dedicated to the project)
- press articles
- blogs
- testimonials
- promotional material

We encourage Beneficiaries to maintain a social media presence to share ongoing project updates with the public. This material can also be included in the final report.

All fiscal receipts, invoices, acknowledgements of payment, and/or documents related to the project, including any provided by the STEM professional and/or listed partners, must be kept for eventual presentation and assessment. Any hard copies should be digitised through photos or scanning. Standard timesheets (downloadable from [here](#)) need to be filled in if you are claiming personnel costs. The invoices/receipts etc are **necessary** for the second tranche (the remaining 30 %) to be disbursed.

11.1. Final Report

The maximum timeframe for the project is 12 months. However, it is possible for a project to close earlier. The final report will need to be submitted no more than one month after the end of the project. The report template can be found [here](#).

The final report consists of the filled-in report template, the filled-in-budget sheet, any invoices/receipts/proof of payment/timesheets, at least five photos, and any other supporting documents you may wish to include.

The National STEM Community Fund Final Budget Report will need to be completed with the actual amounts spent, and submitted together with scanned receipts/invoices of materials/services purchased. As already mentioned, any changes made to the original Budget Plan submitted will need to be shown and justified.

The report must be submitted via email to: stemengagement.esplora@gov.mt

Esplora retains the right to recover funds if it is perceived that these have not been used according to the approved budget in relation to established guidelines.

Esplora retains the right to use any material included in the Final Report for dissemination purposes (unless there are any GDPR or ethical reasons not to).

12. Complaint Procedure

Complaints should be directed to Esplora Interactive Science Centre (Xjenza Malta), specifically to this address: stemengagement.esplora@gov.mt

12.1. When to send a complaint

- Instances where one identifies a procedural anomaly or irregularity in the submission or evaluation process, in terms of the procedure laid down in these guidelines.

12.2. When not to send a complaint:

- If the complaint breaches the policies and regulatory procedures of Esplora Interactive Science Centre (Xjenza Malta) or the Government of Malta
- If the complaint relates to the remits of the application in terms of the evaluation criteria stipulated in these guidelines
- If the complaint does not concern the complainant's project

12.3. Lodging a Complaint

A complaint must be lodged within five (5) days of receiving notification of the results.

The complaint can be emailed to: stemengagement.esplora@gov.mt

Alternately it may be sent by postal mail to:

Research and Funding Team
Esplora Interactive Science Centre
Villa Bigli, Dawret Fra Giovanni Bichi
Kalkara KKR 1320
Malta

The complaint needs to include the following information:

- Full name and contact information
- If you are filing a complaint on behalf of someone else, submit proof that you have the authority to do so
- The specific area of concern
- A brief explanation on how and why you feel that the decision made regarding your project had irregularities despite the procedures laid down in these guidelines or in the standard rules and regulations on good governance relating to the public sector
- Any relevant supporting documentation and evidence
- Any actions taken so far to resolve the problem, including contact with the team at Esplora
- Proposed solutions
- Whether confidentiality is requested (stating reasons)

12.4. On Acknowledgment and Further Processing

Esplora (Xjenza Malta) will send the Complainant a reply within ten (10) business days from the receipt of the complaint.

This will be done after assessing the eligibility of the complaint in question. Esplora (Xjenza Malta) will inform the Complainant whether the complaint is eligible for further processing in accordance with the above criteria.

If the issue has not been/cannot be resolved, the Complainant has the right to refer the concern to the Ombudsman. The Ombudsman's role is to provide an independent and impartial service between the Government and its institutions and the public. The Ombudsman has the power to decide whether a complaint is justified or not. If it should be the former, recommendations will be made for a satisfactory remedy, and on how to mitigate a similar situation in the future. It is highly recommended that complainants acquaint themselves with the main guidelines of the Ombudsman's process/procedure before reporting their complaint.

Please Note: The Ombudsman cannot reverse funding decisions or make changes on behalf of Esplora Interactive Science Centre's legal responsibilities and policies on awarding funds.

13. Contact Details

For more information, kindly contact Esplora on stemengagement.esplora@gov.mt

STEM Community Fund **website:**

Esplora Interactive Science Centre, on behalf of Xjenza Malta and the National STEM Engagement Working Group, wishes you all the best of luck with your projects!

Annex 1 - State-Aid Implications

No State aid implications will arise in the case of assistance awarded to those entities that do not carry out an economic activity within the meaning of Article 107 TFEU.

On the other hand, assistance awarded to undertakings that carry out an economic activity within the meaning of Article 107 TFEU, will give rise to State aid implications. Such assistance will be awarded in line with the terms and conditions of *Commission Regulation EU 2023/2831 of 13 December 2023 on the application of Articles 107 and 108 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union to de minimis aid* (OJ L, 2023/2831, 15.12.2023), herein referred to as *de minimis* Regulation.

The *de minimis* Regulation stipulates that the total amount of *de minimis* aid granted per Member State to a single undertaking shall not exceed €300,000 over any period of three years, including *de minimis* aid from schemes offered by entities other than Esplora. The three-year period is assessed on a rolling basis.

For the purposes of the *de minimis* Regulation, ‘single undertaking’ means all enterprises having at least one of the following relationships with each other:

- (a) one enterprise has a majority of the shareholders’ or members’ voting rights in another enterprise;
- (b) one enterprise has the right to appoint or remove a majority of the members of the administrative, management or supervisory body of another enterprise;
- (c) one enterprise has the right to exercise a dominant influence over another enterprise pursuant to a contract entered into with that enterprise or pursuant to a provision in its memorandum or articles of association;
- (d) one enterprise, which is a shareholder in or member of another enterprise, controls alone, pursuant to an agreement with other shareholders in or members of that enterprise, a majority of shareholders’ or members’ voting rights in that enterprise.

Enterprises having any of the relationships referred to in points (a) to (d) through one or more other enterprises shall also be considered to be a single undertaking.

The *de minimis* Regulation applies to aid granted to undertakings in all sectors, with the exception of:

- i. Aid granted to undertakings active in the primary production of fishery and aquaculture products.
- ii. Aid granted to undertakings active in the processing and marketing of fishery and aquaculture products, where the amount of the aid is fixed on the basis of price or quantity of products purchased or put on the market.

- iii. Aid granted to undertakings active in the primary production of agricultural products.
- iv. Aid granted to undertakings active in the processing and marketing of agricultural products, in one of the following cases:
 - a. Where the amount of the aid is fixed on the basis of the price or quantity of such products purchased from primary producers or put on the market by the undertakings concerned.
 - b. Where the aid is conditional on being partly or entirely passed on to primary producers.
- v. Aid granted to export-related activities towards third countries or Member States, namely aid directly linked to the quantities exported, the establishment and operation of a distribution network or other current expenditure linked to the export activity.
- vi. Aid contingent upon the use of domestic good and services over imported goods and services.

Where an undertaking is active in the sectors referred to in points (i), (ii), (iii) or (iv) above, and is also active in one or more of the other sectors falling within the scope of the *de minimis* Regulation or has other activities falling within the scope of the *de minimis* Regulation, the *de minimis* Regulation shall apply to aid granted in respect of the latter sectors or activities, provided that Esplora ensures, by relying on appropriate means such as separation of activities or separation of accounts, that the activities in the sectors excluded from the scope of this Regulation do not benefit from the *de minimis* aid granted in accordance with this Regulation.

The rules on cumulation of aid as outlined in Article 5 of the *de minimis* Regulation will be respected.

Applicants will be required to submit a signed *de minimis* declaration form indicating any *de minimis* aid received and/or applied for during the applicable three-year period.

In line with Article 6(1) of the *de minimis* Regulation, as of 1 January 2026, information on *de minimis* aid granted under this scheme shall be made publicly available in the central register at national or Union Level.

The following information shall be made public:

- i. The identification of the Beneficiary,
- ii. The aid amount,
- iii. The granting date,

- iv. The aid instrument, and
- v. The sector involved based on the statistical classification of economic activities in the Union ('NACE classification').