

EIT Higher Education Initiative

AquaSphere Accelerator Programme: Open Call Guide Round 2 (2026)

January 2026



AQUASPHERE

<https://aquasphereproject.eu/>

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For Questions Contact us at info@aquasphereproject.eu

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ABOUT THE HIGHER EDUCATION INITIATIVE

About the EIT Higher Education Initiative

The EIT Higher Education Initiative is designed to build innovation and entrepreneurial capacity within higher education by integrating HEIs into Europe's innovation ecosystems and value chains. This is more than funding - it's a catalyst for change. The initiative connects institutions with industry and research, fostering collaboration where it matters most.

At the heart of this initiative is the EIT Knowledge Triangle Model - the integration of business, education, and research. Participating HEIs are expected to use this model as a practical tool to enable systemic, institutional transformation. They will also engage with Smart Specialisation Strategies, apply the Regional Innovation Impact Assessment (RIIA) framework, and contribute to the goals of the EIT Regional Innovation Scheme (EIT RIS).

This approach strengthens ties between HEIs and their regional innovation ecosystems and sets the stage for long-term impact, encouraging institutions to tap into additional funding opportunities beyond the initial project.

HEIs are invited to develop proposals that deliver on six key Actions - building entrepreneurial capacity, embedding innovation, and connecting with ecosystems. The outcome? Tangible transformation. Real results. And a stronger innovation future for Europe.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document is the Guide for the Applicants of the Aquasphere Acceleration program. It summarizes the basic elements of the Open Call for applications under the Aquasphere project. It provides information on the acceleration program, its application process, eligibility criteria, submission requirements, evaluation procedures, terms & conditions, as well as details on the timelines and the benefits of the program.

About AquaSphere

AquaSphere is a pioneering initiative under the EIT Higher Education Initiative that aims to empower Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) as key drivers of water and maritime innovation. Through strategic collaboration, capacity building, and entrepreneurship, AquaSphere is shaping the future of sustainable blue economy solutions across Europe and beyond.

The project addresses the urgent need for sustainable water and maritime innovation by enhancing the capabilities of HEIs. Our goal is to strengthen the role of academic institutions as anchors in regional innovation ecosystems, enabling them to deliver impactful solutions for the blue economy.

AquaSphere is part of the 2024 EIT HEI Initiative call (Project Number 24487), aligning with the EIT's Knowledge Triangle— bridging education, research, and business. The project supports smart specialization strategies and integrates innovation into institutional structures.

Vision: To establish a dynamic, HEI-led innovation ecosystem for the water and maritime sectors.

Mission: To equip HEIs with the tools, networks, and frameworks needed to lead sustainable innovation and entrepreneurship.

Expected Impact: Long-term transformation of institutional practices, stronger HEI-industry linkages, and scalable, sustainable solutions in the blue economy.

AquaSphere Acceleration programme

The AquaSphere Accelerator is designed to support new ventures in the water and maritime sectors. Through mentoring, training, and investor engagement, the program helps startups and spin-offs scale their solutions and enter new markets.

Key components:

- Recruitment & selection of ventures
- Tailored mentoring and coaching
- Investor readiness and engagement activities
- Final pitch events and networking

The accelerator targets 16 (sixteen) ventures that are actively planning to raise funding within the next 18 months to 2 years. These include companies at various stages of development (**pre-seed, seed, and Series A***) that share the common need for dedicated support to achieve investor attractiveness and successful fundraising outcomes. The program provides focused support covering strategy development, investor materials preparation, pitch training, and direct investor exposure.

Core Principles:

- **Investment-Focused:** The programme is structured around three integrated support streams, all designed to help ventures prepare for fundraising and scaling:
 - Growth Strategy Development: Online workshops and virtual coaching.
 - Technical Validation: Remote access to partner universities' expertise and virtual testing protocols.
 - Business Development Support: Practical tools and guidance to strengthen market positioning.
- **Adaptive Delivery:** Content and support are tailored to the unique needs, stage, and timeline of each participating venture.
- **Investor-Connected:** Participants gain access to a curated online database of blue economy investors and are connected with broader investment and stakeholder networks.
- **Sector-Specialized:** All activities are deeply rooted in addressing specific challenges and opportunities within the blue economy.
- **Outcome-Driven:** The program is designed around clear milestones that demonstrate progress toward successful fundraising.
- **Inclusively Accessible:** Delivered entirely online to ensure broad participation across geographical and socioeconomic backgrounds.

***Pre-Seed:** This is the earliest stage of startup funding, often from founders, friends, family, or angel investors to validate an idea and build a MVP (minimum viable product). It typically covers initial research, team formation, and product development.

Seed: Seed funding helps startups develop their product further, gain early traction, and find product-market fit. Investors at this stage are usually angel investors or early-stage venture capital firms.

Series A: Series A funding supports scaling the business, refining the business model, and expanding the customer base. It's typically raised from institutional VCs and focuses on turning traction into a sustainable business.

Programme Overview

The 8-week cycle includes:

- Weekly Workshops/Roundtables: Peer learning and collaborative discussions
- Progress Reviews: Regular check-ins to assess development
- Expert Clinics (Venture Academies): In-depth sessions with subject matter experts
- A Digital Networking Event: Facilitated connections with startups, investors and stakeholders
- 10 Hours of Expert Virtual Mentoring: Tailored, one-on-one guidance
- Online Pitching Sessions: Opportunities to present to potential investors
- Resource Library: Access to digital templates, guides, and support materials
- Community membership in the AquaSphere - Accelerator Programme Alumni

This structure is designed to provide high-impact, flexible support for ventures committed to driving innovation and securing investment in the blue economy.

Important Dates

- Applications open: Early February 2026
- Deadline to apply: 31/03/2026
- Selected ventures notified by: 18 April 2026
- Programme begins: 4 May 2026
- Programme runs: 4 May – 29 June 2026

Sixteen (16) ventures will be selected for this Acceleration Programme. Early applications are encouraged — while we review all applications submitted before the deadline, applying early allows more time for any clarifying questions and demonstrates strong commitment to the programme.

Who Can Apply

The AquaSphere Accelerator is designed for early-stage startups, established startups, and scale-ups developing transformative solutions in the blue economy. This includes, but is not limited to, ventures in:

- Maritime technology
- Sustainable aquaculture
- Water and wastewater management
- Ocean energy
- Coastal resilience and protection
- Related marine and freshwater sectors

Ideal Applicants:

You are encouraged to apply if:

- Your company is registered in an EU Member State or a Horizon Europe Associated Country
- You are at the pre-seed, seed, or Series A stage
- You plan to raise investment within 18–24 months
- You have the vision and ambition to scale your impact across Europe and beyond

Whether you're a technical founder with a background in marine engineering, a startup team tackling an industry bottleneck, or researchers looking to commercialize groundbreaking technology, we want to hear from you.

(!) What matters most is that you have a clear, market-driven vision for how your solution can make a measurable impact in the blue economy.

Why Join

Key Benefits of the Program:

Over an intensive 8-week journey, you'll receive direct support from leading experts in the maritime sector, experienced entrepreneurs, and specialized blue economy investors.

What You'll Gain:

- Tailored Business Strategy Support
 - Work through structured group sessions and one-on-one mentoring to sharpen your value proposition, refine your business model, and develop a robust go-to-market strategy.
- Investor Readiness Toolkit
 - Build a compelling investor narrative, backed by:
 - Validated technical roadmaps
 - Strong financial models
 - Investment materials that resonate with capital providers in maritime and marine sectors
- Deep Expertise and Mentoring
 - Learn from a network of maritime innovators, successful founders, and investors who understand the unique challenges of high-capital, high-tech blue economy ventures.
- Direct Investor Connections
 - Access curated investor databases and engage in pitching sessions and networking events that connect you with the right investors and partners.

By the end of the programme, you'll leave with:

- A clear investment strategy
- Refined and investor-ready materials
- Credible technical validation
- Strong connections with sector-specific investors and industry stakeholders

Selection Process

We use a streamlined, one-step application process reviewed by experts with deep knowledge of blue economy innovation and venture development. Our selection committee of maritime innovation experts and investors will evaluate applications based on:

- Sector relevance — innovations that address real challenges in maritime, water, or coastal sectors
- Team strength — founders with technical expertise, market understanding, and determination
- Scalability potential — ventures that can achieve meaningful market impact
- Funding readiness — ability to attract investment from strategic partners or specialized funds
- Programme fit — whether our specific expertise and network can accelerate your progress meaningfully

We particularly encourage applications from female founders and teams from underrepresented regions. Diversity strengthens innovation, and we're committed to supporting inclusive entrepreneurship in the maritime sector.

Programme Format

The AquaSphere Accelerator runs as a fully virtual 8-week programme, designed to fit around your existing commitments while delivering intensive, focused support. We've structured sessions to accommodate teams across different time zones, with both live interactions and flexible learning components. We take no equity in your company and provide no direct funding. Instead, we focus entirely on preparing you to succeed in your next fundraising round and accelerating your path to market. Our value lies in expertise, connections, and proven frameworks for blue economy venture development. Each week combines expert-led sessions, one-on-one mentoring, peer learning opportunities, and structured work time to apply new insights to your specific venture.

Programme Delivery Infrastructure

The AquaSphere Accelerator will use a shared Microsoft Teams space as the main platform for communication, coordination, and resource sharing across the consortium and the selected beneficiaries.

- Workshops and Mentoring: The Teams space will host joint sessions and can be used for ad hoc collaboration between ventures and mentors.
- Communication: Coordination and internal communication will be managed centrally through Microsoft Teams.
- Resource Sharing: All programme materials (templates, guides, recordings, tools) will be stored and shared in the Teams environment.
- Collaboration Tools: Hosting entities may use tools such as Miro or Google Jamboard during interactive sessions as needed.
- Progress Tracking: The Accelerator will be tracked from the AquaSphere partners on a regular reporting process to monitor venture progress and key performance indicators (KPIs).

- Investor Support: AquaSphere consortium will highly assist on investor outreach and interactions between them and the ventures.

All programme templates (e.g. pitch decks, financial models, TRL reports) will be shared in the Microsoft Teams space. Additional materials may be added during implementation, based on the needs of each cohort.

Are you ready to raise investment and scale your impact in the blue economy?

Apply now: [Application Link](#)

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