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Federal Department for Economic Affairs,
Education and Research EAER

**State Secretariat for Education,
Research and Innovation SERI**
Cooperation and Research in Education

**Call for tenders for
Economics in Vocational and Professional Education and
Training (VPET Economics) Leading House**

Bern, 18 May 2020

Table of contents

1. Brief overview
2. About Leading Houses
3. Thematic focus of VPET Economics Leading House
4. Specific call for tender conditions
5. Formal requirements
6. Submission process
7. Selection process
8. Timetable
9. Contact persons

1. Brief overview

The State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation SERI pursues the objective of establishing long-term coordinated and systematic research activities relating to upper-secondary vocational education and training (VET) and tertiary-level professional education and training (PET), which combined form the vocational and professional education and training system (VPET system). For one thing, research should produce findings that are relevant for strategic management of the VPET system. At the same time, research in this area should be anchored within the Swiss higher education landscape. For this reason, SERI supports not only individual research projects, but also competence centres (i.e. Leading Houses).

Each Leading House has its own research priorities, which are pursued within the context of scientific projects. Leading Houses are also responsible for lending support to young researchers, establishing national and international networks and making use of research findings.

The current call for tenders is intended for holders of a university chair in social sciences (preferably economics) at a Swiss cantonal university or federal institute of technology. The selection procedure is broken down into three phases: submission of an outline; presentation/discussion of this outline with SERI and the VPET Research Committee; submission of the definitive application. All submitted definitive applications are assessed by an international panel of experts. The new Leading House should begin its activities in the summer of 2021.

2. About Leading Houses

Leading Houses have the task of pursuing research in an area deemed relevant to the VET sector, the PET sector or the VPET system as a whole. As a result, Leading Houses work with other university chairs or higher education institutions. They are competence centres and therefore pursue long-term dynamic VPET research at an internationally recognised scientific level. Their role goes beyond merely conducting research projects. The projects are coherent with one another under the roof of the Leading House (model approach). Each Leading House focuses on a comprehensive range of themes in its area of expertise and is therefore present at both the national and international level.

Leading Houses mainly have the following tasks:

- **Research:**
Leading Houses are mainly focused on key VET, PET and VPET issues within a specific thematic framework. The primary aim is to close research gaps, in consideration of the needs of policymakers and practitioners.
- **Support for young researchers:**
Leading Houses develop programmes to support young researchers assigned to the research priority. Young researchers receive guidance and support when carrying out their activities within the Leading House. Young researchers should be encouraged whenever possible to continue their research activities in the VET, PET and VPET field further.
- **Creation of national and international networks:**
Leading Houses form national and international research networks in the area of

- VET, PET and VPET. This networking takes place through specific projects, which include support measures for young researchers and active participation in meetings and workshops.
- Use of research findings:
Leading Houses disseminate their research findings and present these to interested VET, PET and VPET actors at meetings, national and international scientific conferences, workshops and publications. This dissemination is the first step in the transfer of research findings to practitioners. Leading Houses also see to it that young researchers take part in these events.
- Monitoring of the research field:
Leading Houses regularly prepare an overview (State of the Art Report) of the latest state of research in their corresponding area of expertise. This is done according to internationally accepted scientific standards. They identify and report on gaps. Where possible, they close these gaps through their research projects. The State of the Art Report serves as the basis for the launch of new projects.

Each Leading House is assigned a scientific Advisory Board. Its internationally renowned members possess extensive methodological expertise as well as corresponding technical knowledge in VET, PET and VPET, which enables them to provide guidance and support to Leading House activities.

3. Thematic focus of VPET Economics Leading House

Vocational and Professional Education and Training (VPET) is a core element of the Swiss education system. It generates considerable advantages for the Swiss economy and increases its competitiveness on the international stage. School-leavers taking up an apprenticeship receive vocational education and training that gives them a wide variety of career prospects and opportunities to develop their personal and professional skills. The system also gives adults opportunities to develop their professional skills in a practical environment, or to strike out on a new career path.

The VPET system prepares a sustainable supply of skilled workers and managers for the Swiss labour market, and makes a major contribution to the innovativeness of the Swiss economy. It faces constant challenges in view of a rapidly changing labour market, demographic change and immigration, and technological developments in the form of digitalisation. At the same time, it must observe equal opportunities and promote sustainable development across all fields.

In the light of these challenges, the aim of the new Economics in Vocational and Professional Education and Training Leading House is to contribute to research into the economic aspects of VPET. SERI is interested in evidence-based research based on primary and secondary data; intervention studies are also welcome. With the aim of firmly establishing the research field and of ensuring the applicability of the research results, cooperation projects with VPET practitioners, with international partners and with partners in the field of evaluation and implementation research are also welcome, as is potential long-term cooperation with existing projects or with other leading houses in Swiss VPET research.

The following topics are of particular interest:

1) Business and political economic aspects of the Swiss VPET system

The Confederation, the cantons and professional organisations are jointly responsible for vocational and professional education and training in Switzerland. This cooperation is a key element of the Swiss education system and is geared to the needs of the labour market and society. This gives rise to a number of research questions, for example:

- How should the VPET system develop in order to exist in a rapidly changing world of work and to remain competitive going forward? What does this mean for individuals, companies and the state?
- What incentives should there be for individuals, companies and society in order to ensure VPET continues to be developed in a sustainable, visionary and competent manner? To what extent are these incentives necessary, if at all?
- How can equity be achieved in vocational and professional education and training? What economic consequences does this have?
- How do aspects of sustainable development influence VPET? And how are they taken account of in the economic activities of VPET? What are the economic consequences?
- How can entry and re-entry into the world of work and career changes be promoted through VPET?
- What form do the transitions from vocational education and training to professional education and training and from vocational education and training or from professional education and training to the world of work take? Which career paths (via VPET) are taken and what economic consequences do the different paths have for individuals, companies and the state?
- How can VPET be made an attractive option, especially for highly qualified young people? What role do economic incentives play?
- What are the economic consequences of digitalisation in VPET and for host training companies? To what extent does digitalisation change the relationship between VPET and academic higher education?
- How does digitalisation change the working relationship between companies and graduates of VPET? What economic effects can be expected?
- Under what conditions can the data generated by and about VPET be better used? What economic advantages could this have? What might the effects be for individuals, companies and the state?
- How can continuing education and training and life-long learning best benefit companies, individuals and the state?
- What professional skills are necessary in a competitive economy?
- How can VPET be funded in a transparent, efficient and non-bureaucratic way so that crises with far-reaching (economic) consequences, such as COVID-19, can be more readily overcome?
- How do innovative companies and new types of business take part in the VPET system? How cost-effective is involvement in VPET for these companies? What form does their involvement take?
- What impact is the shift of jobs from manufacturing to a growing service industry having on VPET?
- What is the impact of the new system of individual funding in professional education and training on the individuals themselves, companies, course providers and the state?
- What are the determinants of the benefits of VPET to individual companies and to the economy as a whole?

- What are the determinants of the returns on investment in education and training for individuals and the state? What differences are there between the different educational paths (VET, PET, academic path, mixed paths)?
- What are the benefits of certificates issued by individual economic sectors for individuals, funding entities and for businesses?
- What economic benefits are there to models involving school-based VET, the basic year ('Basislehrjahr', "année initiale d'apprentissage") or similar models for businesses, apprentices and the economy, compared to the dual-track model? Are there economic benefits to these different models for the various players involved?

2) Internationalisation and globalisation of the labour market

Swiss VPET is well known and enjoys international renown as a highly successful system, in particular in terms of the skills learners acquire. The following research questions arise from this:

- What conditions are necessary in order to ensure that Swiss VPET can adapt flexibly to the changing global economic environment and remain a leader in it?
- Under what conditions do multinational corporations based in Switzerland participate in VPET? Do crisis situations (e.g. the COVID-19 crisis) have an impact on their involvement? If yes, in what way?
- Is cooperation between the Confederation and businesses abroad cost-efficient and effective?
- How do Swiss educational funding models compare with those in other countries?
- How does the international recognition of diplomas affect individuals, the state and host companies economically?

These questions are just examples. Tenders should describe the research focus and state the research questions in more detail. Projects have to be coherent with one another (model approach). Applicants are free, in addition to setting out a clear focus on the economics of VPET, to propose research in other related fields (esp. sociology, political science and psychology) or to formulate other research questions in the topic areas given here. Initiatives for cooperation between researchers in different disciplines and/or at different universities are highly welcomed.

4. Call for tender conditions

Demonstrated scientific performance and managerial experience

The head (or heads) of the Leading House must be able to demonstrate first-rate scientific performance. He/she must have a thorough knowledge of VPET research and institutions and have relevant internationally peer-reviewed publications. He/she must also have the skills needed to coordinate and manage a research team. The head must also enjoy a solid international reputation in their field of expertise.

Coherent research programme

As presented in no. 2, the research programme of the Leading House must be long-term in focus, covering a time horizon of 10 to 12 years. During this time, activities shall pass through three phases: introduction, consolidation and maturity. The present call for tenders covers the first phase, which runs for a period of four years.

In this phase the Leading House launches its first research projects; recruits potential young researchers and establishes contacts with third parties for project implementation; establishes contact with researchers in Switzerland and abroad who are involved in relevant areas; and presents status reports and initial research findings at scientific conferences.

For this reason, application documents – together with a description of research activities in the first phase – provide an outline of research prospects for the following years. In addition, documents should provide detailed information about knowledge transfer and support to be given to young researchers. The documents specifically shows how the pursued objectives may be implemented. It should be clear from the documents submitted that the Leading House has extensive expertise in the Swiss VPET system.

Structure and funding

The Leading House enjoys considerable autonomy. The head (or heads) of the Leading House establishes the organisation structure on the basis of research priorities.

Financial requirements are determined according to the specific needs of each Leading House and planned research projects. SERI assumes that it will make an annual contribution of CHF 1,500,000 to 2,000,000 (subject to approval of its own budget by Parliament).

5. Formal requirements

Eligibility requirements

The application should be submitted by the person (or persons) who will serve as head of the Leading House. This person must be employed by a Swiss cantonal university or a federal institute of technology and must be able to devote at least 20% of his/her working time to Leading House activities.

Commitment

The university or federal institute of technology to which the Leading House is linked must give a written commitment on the type and scope of support and sustainable measures that will be taken after the three phases of the VPET Economics Leading House have been completed.

Cooperation initiatives

Importance must be given to interdisciplinary approaches or dialogue between disciplines. Cooperation initiatives between or with research institutes are explicitly welcomed.

Completeness and submission deadlines

Documents (outlines, applications) must meet formal requirements and will be critically examined by the Scientific Advisory Committee for VPET Research. Since documents are also to be reviewed by international experts, documents must be drafted in English. They must be submitted on official forms no later than the established submission deadline.

6. Submission process

There are three steps in the submission process:

- 1) Submission and assessment of outlines,
- 2) Presentation of planned Leading House and follow-up discussion of plans with SERI and the Scientific Advisory Committee for VPET Research
- 3) Submission of definitive application.

a. Outlines

Outlines must be sent to SERI using the form provided. The presentation of the Leading House must follow a pre-determined structure and may not exceed ten pages in length. It must include information about the following:

- Commitment of the university or federal institute of technology
- Research programme
- Support for young researchers

- Coordination and operational management of the Leading House
- Budget planning

The deadline for applications is midnight on 17.8.2020. Applications must be unbound, signed and submitted in both hardcopy and electronic form to the following address:

State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation SERI
Cooperation in Education Division
Cooperation and Research in Education
Ms Monika Kiefer
Einsteinstrasse 2
3003 Bern

The electronic version must be sent to the following e-mail address:

bbfo@sbfi.admin.ch

b. Presentation and discussion

The applicants considered in the first selection round will be asked to present and discuss their project to SERI and its Scientific Advisory Committee for VPET Research on 15.10.2020. This presentation should last for around 30 minutes. The follow-up discussion with SERI and the Scientific Advisory Committee serves to clarify expectations of all parties and help with preparations for submission of applications. Those applicants whose projects for creation of the new Leading House are deemed suitable, will be asked to submit a formal funding application.

c. Application

The funding application is more detailed than the outline (max. 30 pages) and takes the feedback received from the discussion with SERI and the VPET Research Committee after the project presentation into account. The content should follow the structure of the application form. The application must include the following information:

- Confirmation of commitment from the university or federal institute of technology
- Research programme
- Support for young researchers
- Coordination and operational management of the Leading House
- Budget planning

The deadline for applications is midnight on 31.12.2020. Applications must be unbound, signed and submitted in both hardcopy and electronic form to the following address:

State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation SERI
Division Cooperation in Education
Cooperation and Research in Education
Ms Monika Kiefer
Einsteinstrasse 2
3003 Bern

The electronic version must be sent to the following e-mail address:

bbfo@sbfi.admin.ch

The official form may be obtained by sending an e-mail request to bbfo@sbfi.admin.ch or may be downloaded from the following website: www.sbfi.admin.ch/bbfo-gesuchseingabe-f

7. Selection process

Assessment of the content of outlines and applications is preceded by a formal verification conducted by SERI. Any submissions that do not meet formal requirements will not be processed further. Formal requirements include:

- Confirmation of commitment from the university or federal institute of technology;
- Submission by the established deadline;
- Use of the official form, completeness of documentation;
- Submission by the future head of the Leading House;
- Candidate is currently employed by a Swiss higher education institution.

a. Assessment of outlines

Outlines are intended to enable ascertainment of the overall suitability of the project as well as its scientific potential. The assessment is carried out by SERI and the Scientific Advisory Committee for VPET Research. The Scientific Advisory Committee for VPET Research is comprised of a panel of government officials and internationally recognised researchers.

During the initial assessment, the following criteria are important:

- Suitability and quality of outlines;
- Compliance with tendering instructions;
- Innovation potential;
- Interdisciplinary approach and relevance of projects to VET research;
- Coherence of projects with one another (model approach);
- Plausibility of objectives relating to the support for young researchers, building of networks and use of research findings;
- Scientific reputation of the head of the Leading House and experience managing complex projects;
- Nature and scope of the commitment.

b. Presentation/Discussion

SERI will notify applicants in writing of the outcome of the outline assessment. Applicants with good chances of success will be asked to present their project to SERI representatives and the members of the Scientific Advisory Committee for VPET Research. The presentation will be followed by feedback and discussion. After this, applicants will be asked to submit a definitive application based on the points highlighted during the discussion.

c. Assessment of applications

Applications will be assessed on the basis of the observations of international experts, SERI requirements and stance of the Scientific Advisory Committee for VPET Research.

The purpose of the assessment is to select a new Leading House. The following criteria will be considered:

- Expertise of the applicant;
- Scientific quality of research projects;
- Added value of new approaches and methods;
- Quality of cooperation initiatives relating to the research topic and beyond;
- Quality of implementation objectives;
- Budget relevance and plausibility;
- Nature and scope of the commitment.

The person (or persons) selected as head of the Leading House will be notified in writing. Approval of the application will result in issuance of a contract between the higher education institution and the Confederation.

8. Timetable

Issuance of call for tenders:	18 May 2020
Submission deadline for outlines:	17 August 2020
Presentation of selected outlines:	15 October 2020
Submission deadline for applications:	31 December 2020
International assessment:	January / February 2021
Selection of Leading House:	March 2021
Commencement of activities:	Summer 2021

9. Contact persons

For research-related questions:

Prof. Kerstin Pull, Member of the VPET Research Committee; Kerstin.pull@uni-tuebingen.de

For administrative matters:

SERI, VPET Research, Camil Würgler, camil.wuergler@sbfi.admin.ch; Isabelle Schenker; isabelle.schenker@sbfi.admin.ch