



Frequently Asked Questions

Please find below the most frequently asked questions (FAQ) by applicants for RIFS Fellowships.

As we have regularly also special fellowship calls, please check also their respective FAQ. Our suggestion would be: If you intend to apply to a special call, please check the FAQ below first and then subsequently check the special FAQ for the respective call, as there may be deviations from the FAQ list below.

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1 Admission

1.1 Why should I become a Fellow?

RIFS is a dynamic institute operating at the cross-section of research and societal transformation. It provides not only access to many disciplines from natural science to the humanities, but also from outside of academia, including the arts, business, civil society and politics. Particularly with its combination of research and a dedicated Fellow Programme, it is allowing for international exchange, networking and engagement in societally relevant transformation research.

As Fellow, you will be embedded at the institute and supported in implementing innovative projects which may not be implementable elsewhere. You will be enriched by a diverse and open-minded environment, allowing you to explore novel ideas jointly with other fellows and our researchers.

In addition, RIFS is located in the Potsdam/Berlin area, where several major universities and research organisations of Germany and indeed Europe as a whole are located. It provides a rich academic field on all matters with regards to sustainability, while being at the heart of one of the major European capitals with many international governmental and non-governmental organisations also present. Aside from this, Potsdam/Berlin is a hub for culture and arts in Europe, and a centre of innovation and creativity. Finally, the two cities are located within the beautiful landscape of Brandenburg, allowing you to experience the whole range of a dynamic multi-cultural urban centre to a serene countryside.



1.2 How many Fellows are there at RIFS?

The number may vary from one year to the other, depending on available resources, length of Fellow stays, and other aspects. On average, about 15-20 Fellows are present at anyone time

In addition, individuals with their own funding (such as by e.g. the Alexander von Humboldt-Foundation, the Chinese Scholarship Council, the Fulbright Foundation), may join the institute.

1.3 How do I become a Fellow?

There are two ways to become a Fellow at RIFS.

Firstly, through public calls for application. Usually, there are three calls per year:

- The annual general call, through which most fellows are recruited.
- The annual Klaus Töpfer Sustainability Fellowship.
- Special thematic calls, often implemented with jointly with partner organisations, such as the "Planetary Transitions: Potsdam Artist Residency" (since 2025), the 2024 call on "Science Communication" or the 2018 call on "Social Justice and Sustainability", through which usually 1-2 Fellows per call are recruited.

Fellows who successfully apply during the public calls may become Fellows starting from spring of the following year, i.e.: A successful application in summer 2026 would mean you could become a Fellow in spring 2027.

Secondly, the RIFS Directors may invite individuals as Fellows to support activities in a specific area.

1.4 What are the selection criteria to become a Fellow?

RIFS seeks for highly qualified individuals from around the world and different parts of society, and aims to have a high diversity. Complementarity to our research program, originality, quality, feasibility, and interface between stakeholders are key criteria.



Special calls may have varying selection criteria. Please check the respective calls.

1.5 What is the Duration of a Fellowship?

The minimum and maximum duration is differing, depending on the fellowship call. Please check the respective call for details.

1.6 Can I take Breaks in the Fellowship, e.g. for personal Reasons?

Yes, breaks are possible.

If you already aware during the time of application, please notify this in your application documents.

If a break becomes necessary during your fellowship (e.g. for family matters), please inform us as early as possible.

1.7 I am currently (temporarily/permanently) employed at an organisation. Can I still become a Fellow?

Yes.

Depending on the rules of your home organisation, specific arrangements may need to be made. Please check early with your home organization.

1.8 Can I become a RIFS Fellow again if I have been a RIFS Fellow before?

In principle yes: The public call for Fellow applications is open for everybody, irrespective whether they have been a Fellow before or not. However, we expect that there is a certain time between fellowships, i.e. not several consecutive Fellowships.



RIFS may also invite former Fellows as well as other cooperation partners to become "Affiliated Scholars", who are long-term cooperation partners which may continuously work together with RIFS on certain areas and topics. Most Affiliated Scholars of RIFS have been former Fellows.

1.9 I applied successfully for a Fellowship, but cannot start as intended – can it be postponed, or do I lose the Fellowship?

In principle, a Fellowship can be postponed. A few weeks or a few months is entirely fine. For example, if you intended start date was April 1, but it needs to be postponed to June 15. The latest starting date is September 1.

Fellowships cannot be postponed the following year.

1.10 Do I need a visa to become a Fellow?

You do not need a visa for your application. Depending on your home country and its diplomatic relations with Germany, you may need to acquire a visa to enter Germany eventually.

Individuals from European countries which are part of the "Schengen Area" (the European Union, plus additional countries such as Switzerland, Norway, and others) do not need a visa, even in case of an extended stay.

For many countries, you will be allowed to stay in Germany for up to 90 days without a special visa and can even apply for a visa when you are already in Germany, in case you intend to stay for more than 90 days.

In some cases, you need a valid visa even before entering Germany.

In case you are coming from outside the European Union, please check the website of the [German Federal Foreign Office](#) on visa requirements.



2 Expectations of RIFS

2.1 What duties do I have as Fellow of RIFS

We expect and invite you to the following in particular:

- Participating in the bi-weekly Fellow Meetings.
- Contributing to our weekly seminar series, the Tuesday Talks.
- Be ready and open to engage in discussions and interactions with other Fellows and staff members of RIFS.
- Associate and cooperate with the research groups of the institute.
- Acknowledge in case a publication or other activity benefited from the work done at RIFS.
- Actively contributing to the further development of the Fellow Programme.
- A final report on the findings of your work.

Otherwise, RIFS Fellows are relatively free in their work and may choose to associate themselves with various projects.

2.2 Do I have to publish while I am a Fellow?

It would be highly appreciated if your stay at RIFS would result in an output. This could be a publication, such as a peer-reviewed article or a piece in the RIFS publication series, but other formats, such as blog posts, videos, presentations, exhibitions, conferences, podcasts, pieces of art and other outputs are also possible. It depends very strongly on the nature of your project and the target audience of your work.

In case your time at RIFS contributed to publications and other issues which are completed after your stay at RIFS, we would appreciate if you acknowledge the support of RIFS.

2.3 Are remote Fellowships possible?

No.



We expect regular physical presence at the institute.

3 Remuneration, Travel, Budgets and other Legal Aspects

3.1 Are Fellowships remunerated at RIFS?

RIFS provides a stipend to the Fellows to cover their living costs, if they have to go unpaid leave during their time as a Fellow. The details are available in the RIFS Stipend Guidelines:

- [German version of RIFS Stipend Guidelines.](#)
- [English version of RIFS Stipend Guidelines.](#)

All stipends and grants are subject to approval by the funding bodies of the RIFS.

3.2 Can I have additional income while I am a Fellow?

We expect that Fellows devote their time fully to their respective project and the work at the institute. However, we are aware that this may not always be feasible (e.g. teaching commitments at the home university). This should not exceed about one day per week. Feel free to contact us at achim.maas@rifs-potsdam.de for specific questions.

3.3 Will my travel to and from RIFS as a Fellow be covered?

The immediate travel costs (plane or train, overnight stay in case of very long-distance travels, etc.) will be covered. This includes also the costs for immediate family members (spouse, children) will also be covered.

Costs such as insurances, visa costs or else will not be covered for.

Please contact the RIFS Fellow-Programme at achim.maas@rifs-potsdam.de for any additional questions.



3.4 Does RIFS cover moving costs?

In case a Fellow stays for a reasonable period of time which justifies moving parts of the household – particular in case of longer stays when the respective family accompanies the Fellow – RIFS provides financial support to the moving Fellow. The amount of funds provided depends on the distance moved and is listed in the Stipend Guidelines (see section 3.1 above).

Please contact the RIFS Fellow-Programme at achim.maas@rifs-potsdam.de for any questions.

3.5 Do I have to sign a contract when I become a Fellow?

Yes.

In case you would like to get a general idea of the Fellowship contracts, please contact the RIFS Fellow-Programme at achim.maas@rifs-potsdam.de.

3.6 Do I have to pay taxes when I am a Fellow?

In Germany, the stipend is tax free.

However, depending on your home country, you may have to pay taxes. In some countries, it is tax free, as long as the stipend is below a certain threshold. Other countries do not have thresholds, so it is also tax free there. Please check with your local tax advisor on this.

3.7 Will RIFS cover Health Insurance?

No.

You have to cover your health insurance form your stipend.



However, there are several insurance companies which specialize in short-term visitors from outside Germany. We cannot recommend any specific company, as their costs, services and packages vary depending on the individual case. But we can happily provide several companies which past Fellows have used.

3.8 Does RIFS pay for travel while I am a Fellow?

Yes, but only for activities directly related to your Fellowship at RIFS and within reasonable limits. In addition, costs of accompanying family members will not be covered, with the exception of travel to Potsdam at the beginning of the Fellowship and departure at the end of the Fellowship.

Travel costs will be reimbursed according to the German Federal Travel Law ("Bundesreisekostengesetz"). All travel must be booked via the institute, particular long-distance travel and accommodation, unless there is a specific reason this is not possible (e.g. field research, requiring moving around with various modes of transportation which can only be organized locally).

The institute does not cover per diem.

3.9 Do I have a budget while I am Fellow?

Yes, if you hand in a budget as part of your application. The budget needs to be specified to some degree, for example "X Euro for travel". It does not need to be very detailed, as changes often occur. The budget items can be thereby changed, e.g. switching from travel to service contracts or other items, as long as it does not exceed the initially handed in budget.

However, the budget is dependent on the overall available budget of the RIFS, meaning the final budget during your Fellowship may differ to that you have handed in during your application.

The budget must be spent according to the regulations of RIFS. For example, at certain thresholds, we require multiple offers and cannot directly contract a specific person or organisation.



Please note that all contracts are made between the respective service provider and the RIFS. Fellows cannot sign contracts on behalf of RIFS. We always require an offer before and an invoice afterwards.

3.10 Can I keep what I have bought with the Budget?

No.

All items procured during the Fellowship are the property of RIFS.

3.11 Can I organise a workshop while being at RIFS?

Yes.

If you intend to do so, please inform us within your application. We can also organize one on short notice, if budget is available and/or you decide to reshuffle your budget (see above).

3.12 What are the Working Hours and Vacation Rules?

You are free to decide about your working hours and do not have to fill out time sheets.

With regard to vacation, we recommend to orient yourself at the vacation days of regular employees, which is 2.5 days per week. For a 12 month Fellowship, this would be then 30 days.

3.13 Can I do Home Office?

Yes.



We would expect presence on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, which are the “busiest” days of the institute. Most colleagues do Home Office on Mondays and Fridays. Please check also with the research group you are associated with, what the appropriate days are (e.g., when are team meetings).

3.14 Do I have to call in sick?

No.

But we appreciate if you inform us if you are absent for health reasons for a longer period. We are happy to support you here if you have any questions.

4. Application Portal and Submission

4.1 What is the Application Portal?

We use the system Concludis for uploading applications.

All applications must be uploaded via the Concludis portal. The link to the respective fellowship call is available at our jobs site, under <https://www.gfz.de/en/career/job-offers>.

4.2 Can I submit Applications via E-Mail?

No.

Applications submitted via E-Mail will be automatically rejected.

4.3 What is when I encounter Technical Difficulties?

In three calls published in 2025, over 800 applications from all around the world have been uploaded successfully. Our experience is that the system is working very well.



If you encounter difficulties, please try again later.

Please make sure you have a stable internet connection. Having application documents with relatively small size (e.g. few hundred kilobytes instead of several megabytes) is recommended.

Please do not wait until the "last minute" for your application.

Also, please note that the application portal will automatically shut down once the deadline is reached. For example: If you start uploading your documents at 23:55 and the deadline is 23:59, the portal will shut down at 23:59, perhaps in the middle when you are uploading your documents. Once the portal shuts down, you can no longer upload documents and only what has been uploaded until then will be accepted.

4.4 How many Documents can I upload?

The respective call stipulates the documents which are mandatory. It varies from call to call.

Only the mandatory documents need to be uploaded. If they are not uploaded, the application portal will not accept your application.

You can upload more documents, but they will not be part of the evaluation process.

4.5 What is the maximum size of the Documents?

25 Megabytes is the maximum size per document uploaded.

4.6 Can I change the Documents once Uploaded?

No.



The documents you uploaded are considered final. No changes are possible.

4.7 Closure of Application Portal

Please note that the application portal will close at the time and date specified in the call. The current time in Germany (UTC +1h) applies.

We strongly recommend that you submit hours, if not days before the actual deadline to prevent the closure of the application portal during uploading your application documents.

4.8 I just learnt about the Call. Can I submit an Application after the Deadline?

No.

4.9 The Application Portal asks a lot of Questions. Do I have to fill them out?

Ideally yes.

But your application will be evaluated based on the documents you submitted. If you do not respond to the questions which are not mandatory, it will not affect the evaluation of your application.

4.10 When will I be informed about the Results of my Application?

The timelines vary from call to call, and the evaluation process also slightly differs.

The respective call for applications specifies the rough timeline.



5. Application Documents

5.1 What purpose has the proposal?

The proposal should highlight the major topics and issues you would like to address during your stay as a Fellow at RIFS. It helps the institute to understand where your particular interests are and how you can contribute.

5.2 What should the structure of the proposal look like?

The proposal structure depends on the call you are applying to. Please check the requirements in the respective call.

5.3 Shall I reference topics or projects of RIFS?

In your application, you have to make clear how your work relates to the work of the institute, and to which research groups in particular.

5.4 How long should the proposal be?

The proposal structure depends on the call you are applying to. Please check the requirements in the respective call. Usually, it should not exceed 5 pages (excluding bibliography).

5.5 How detailed should my proposal be?

The proposal does not need to be extremely detailed to allow for space and adjustments once the Fellowship starts. However, it should not be entirely open and defining a time line and some milestones or work packages would be helpful.



5.6 Can there be annexes to the proposal?

Some call for applications allows submitting additional documents. Please check the possibilities in the respective call you like to apply to.

5.7 Who will receive the proposal?

Basically, the Fellow Unit, the Research Group Leaders and the Directors of RIFS.

Depending on the call, external reviewers or a jury would receive the application.

5.8 Will the proposal be published?

No.

But for the purpose of information sharing, the proposals of successful applicants will be made available to other Fellows and staff members. Proposals of unsuccessful applications will be deleted once the entire Fellow application and selection process is completed.

5.10 Am I bound to the proposal once I am a Fellow?

Proposals may be adapted within reason and good justification. But the general topic has to remain the same. Changes are acceptable.

Please, check with the Head of the Fellow Programme before adaptations are made.



5.11 Can I jointly apply with another person or even a team?

Yes, but the page limits remain the same.

For example, if the page limit for the CV is two pages, all team members must fit into these two pages. In addition, it must be made clear why it is a joint application and the skills of the respective are necessary.

6. Potsdam

6.1 Why is the RIFS located in Potsdam?

Research organisations which are independent from universities are often co-funded by the German Federal Government and one of the sixteen states of Germany. In such cases, the headquarters of the research organisation is located in the state which is co-funding it. The RIFS is co-funded by the German Federal Ministry for Education and Science (BMBF) and the Brandenburg Ministry for Science, Research and Culture (MWFK). Potsdam is the capital of the state of Brandenburg, and many other research organisations in Potsdam are working on sustainability topics, more so than in any other city in Brandenburg.

6.2 What other research organisations are in Potsdam?

The history of Potsdam as major science hub goes back to the 1870s. Today, 40 research organisations including several higher education institutions are located in Potsdam. With about 10,000 people working as researcher or science support staff, Potsdam, with its 190,000 residents, has been called "Science City".

6.3 Do I have to live in Potsdam while I am a Fellow?

Potsdam is a city with a high standard of living. It is a very green city, with many parks, rivers and lakes. It is also a very safe and international city, with



thousands of international scientists and students living and working here. You could easily reach the centre of Berlin or the beautiful countryside of Brandenburg.

But you do not have to live in Potsdam.

From the institute, you can reach via public transport either the centre of Berlin or one of the villages surrounding Potsdam.

6.4 Does the RIFS provide housing in Potsdam?

The RIFS does have a limited number of apartments. These are reserved particular for Fellows outside of Germany, as it is for them usually more difficult to search for appropriate housing.

The RIFS is happy to support finding an appropriate apartment in Potsdam and/or Berlin. Please start as early as possible to find appropriate housing, as the housing market is quite dynamic.

6.5 How far is Berlin from Potsdam?

Potsdam and Berlin are adjacent to each other. In fact, while the RIFS is located in Potsdam, the Berlin city limit is just 1.5km from the institute. The city centre of Berlin is about 25km from the RIFS.

6.6 Am I allowed to bring family members, particular school-age children, to Germany?

Yes.

However, since the German school system is not entirely uncomplicated and some things require special preparation here, you should take a look at this [website](#). For individual questions and support, please contact the [Fellow Unit](#).



6.7 Where can I find more information on Potsdam and Berlin?

Several research organisations have created a joined Welcome Centre, which provides publicly accessible information for foreign researchers. It provides a comprehensive overview and is a good start for preparing your trip. You find it [here](#).

7. Structure of RIFS

7.1 What is the difference between Research Themes and Research Groups?

Research Groups are the main operative unit of the institute. They focus on a specific topic. They are led by a Research Group leader. Occasionally, they have co-leads.

Research Themes are an overarching umbrella of multiple Research Groups who are working on related topics. The number of Research Groups per Research Theme varies.

Fellows work primarily with Research Groups, but may be invited to join activities of Research Themes (e.g., joint retreats, discussions, etc.).

7.2 Are Research Themes then analogue to Departments?

No.

Research Themes have two co-speakers, which are selected from the respective theme. They have a representative and coordinating function and are members of the Research Integration Committee (RIC), which advises the directors of RIFS. They have no supervisory function towards the Research Group Leaders.



7.3 What is the Research Integration Committee (RIC)?

The RIC is an advisory body to the directors of RIFS. It consists of two representatives per Research Theme, plus the Head of Communications and Head of the Fellow Programme.

It has an advisory function.

7.4 If the Research Integration Committee (RIC) advises the Directors, why does the RIFS have an Advisory Board (AB)?

The RIC provides an internal perspective.

The AB provides an external perspective.

Both inform and advise the RIFS directors on how possibly further develop the institute.

7.5 What is the relationship with GFZ?

RIFS is legally part of the GFZ – Helmholtz Centre for Geosciences.

RIFS is independent in its scientific objectives and also has a separate budget.

The closest analogue may be, that RIFS could be considered a faculty within a university: Pursuing the topics of the faculty, having its own budget, but having to comply to structures and regulations applicable to the organization as a whole.

7.6 GFZ is part of the “Helmholtz-Association” – what does that mean?

Germany is a federal state. Non-university research organisations are funded on the state level, unless they are considered of national relevance. They are grouped in four umbrella organisations: The Fraunhofer Society, the Helmholtz Association, the Leibniz Association, and the Max Planck Society. Each of them



has a different focus. The Max Planck Society for example, is focusing particular on basic / foundational research.

7.7 If GFZ is part of Helmholtz, then so is RIFS – Why?

The RIFS started out as the Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies (IASS) and was formally founded in February 2009. Prior to that, in 2008, a first concept paper, leading to the creation of the institute, it was discussed, whether the IASS should eventually become part of either the Leibniz or the Helmholtz Association. Both have a strong focus on interdisciplinary research and addressing societal challenges.

The IASS was evaluated in 2014 and 2019 by the German Science Council. After the second evaluation, the funding agencies, the Federal Government and the State of Brandenburg, decided that IASS should be joining the Helmholtz Association and become part of GFZ.

After becoming part of GFZ, it was renamed to Research Institute for Sustainability, RIFS.

7.8 Why the change of name, from IASS to RIFS?

The IASS started out as an institute for advanced studies, comparable to the Institute for Advanced Studies at Princeton University, where primarily fellows would work. One of its early monikers was indeed "Princeton in Potsdam".

However, societal transformations processes take years, if not decades, while fellows are only temporarily present. It was therefore decided to re-balance the staff of the institute: A combination of more permanently employed individuals who cooperate with temporary fellows, who provide fresh and new ideas, thus re-invigorating the institute on a regular basis and prevent ossification.

To reflect this change in approach, the name was changed. Also, to highlight, that we are not only studying sustainability as an academic object, but that we actively conduct research **for** sustainability.