

Press Release – January 31st, 2024

Strategic Academic Alliance for Innovation in Cybersecurity and Digital Trust

A noteworthy development in the field of innovation sees EPFL, HEIG-VD and UNIL joining forces at the highest level, with the support of the Canton of Vaud, to unveil the outline of the [seal] Program. This initiative aims to stimulate collaboration between the three universities and accelerate the transfer of knowledge and technologies to the socio-economic fabric in the field of digital trust and cybersecurity. The launch of the Program includes a first call for projects dealing with cybercrime.

Just as innovation drives our economy, digitalization drives innovation, and trust drives digitalization. In this context of the rapid digitization of our society, the notion of trust and security is at the heart of all concerns.

The **[seal]** Program, which takes its name from the idea of a seal that attests to the legality or authenticity of a document and symbolizes the notions of security and trust, is the result of a strategic alliance between three universities – the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne (EPFL), the University of Applied Sciences in Business and Engineering of the Canton of Vaud (HEIG-VD), and the University of Lausanne (UNIL). In a collaborative effort, they have decided to combine their unique, complementary, and internationally recognized expertise, to address the many challenges related to digital trust and cybersecurity.

*"There is an obvious but under-utilized complementarity between the areas of expertise of the three institutions – deep technologies at EPFL, applied cybersecurity at HEIG-VD, and computer crime at UNIL. The **[seal]** Program is a tool that will provide concrete opportunities for collaboration and open up new fields of innovation."* explains Sylvain Pasini, Professor at HEIG-VD, who played a key role in designing and initiating the program.

Essential for many industries undergoing change, the field is highly strategic for the canton of Vaud. Therefore, the Vaud Government has decided to support this new program as part of its public policy through the Innovation Support Fund.

*"The **[seal]** Program is an essential complement to the activities carried out by Trust Valley, the Lake Geneva cluster in digital trust and cybersecurity. It will make it possible to implement new projects while benefiting from the dynamic ecosystem promoted and driven by Trust Valley. We expect a close collaboration is between the two organizations."* emphasizes Raphaël Conz, Head of the Office for Economy and Innovation Promotion of the Canton of Vaud (SPEI), and Chairman of the program's Steering Committee.

Give priority to funding collaborative innovation projects

With an annual budget of CHF 600,000 over the next five years, the **[seal]** Program will focus its activities on three main areas:

- [Funding collaborative innovation projects
- [Setting up new continuing education programs
- [Organizing joint events

In the first operational phase, the focus will be on funding collaborative innovation projects, with the opening of the first thematic call for projects. A second call for projects, and/or the possibility to freely submit projects on other topics in the field, will be proposed later this year.

Funded projects must involve at least two academic partners (HEIG-VD, EPFL, UNIL) and one implementation partner (company, non-profit organization, public administration), and must offer potential direct benefits for the socio-economic fabric of the canton of Vaud. The rewards are commensurate with the ambitions, as each project can receive financial support of up to CHF 100,000, covering up to 90% of the costs incurred by the various partners. In addition, preliminary financial incentives are available to generate ideas and set up projects.

"The main challenge is to foster cooperation between the three universities, each of which has a very different culture. That is why we have designed an offer that is particularly incentivizing compared to the usual standards of public innovation support. There is no doubt that the industrial partners will take advantage of the funding opportunities and contribute to the stimulation of the academic partners." notes Sandy Wetzel, Program Manager.

Highly skilled, agile enterprise

For practical reasons, the **[seal]** Program does not have its own legal personality. It is administratively attached to HEIG-VD.

To structure and manage the Program, the partners have enlisted the expertise of Sandy Wetzel, a manager with 15 years of experience in economic development and innovation promotion (former director of Y-PARC technology park in Yverdon-les-Bains and of Microcity, the innovation agency of the canton of Neuchâtel), who took up his position in September 2023.

A Steering Committee, composed of representatives from the three universities and from the cantonal departments directly involved, as well as entrepreneurs and experts from the private sector, has been set up to oversee the strategy and select the projects to be financed by the Program.

Call for projects: "Empowering Small Organizations to Fight Against the Exponential Growth of Cybercrime"

For the first call for projects, a topic at the heart of current events has been chosen.

In addition to the cyber risk awareness provided to SMEs and municipalities through the Trust4SMEs program run by Trust Valley, the **[seal]** Program strengthens the resources available to these small structures, enabling them to develop innovative technical solutions tailored to their needs.

The objective of this call is to contribute to the development of technology building blocks and the creation of breakthrough methods and tools for security assessment, prevention, detection, and analysis of vulnerabilities and intrusions in systems and computer networks specific to small organizations, typically SMEs and municipal administrations.

This call, carried out in collaboration with the Forensic Department of the Vaud Police, is designed to explore the many synergies arising from the overlapping expertise of the three universities.

For more information, visit <https://seal-innovation.ch/en/appels-a-projets/>

Contact

Sandy Wetzel, **[seal]** Program Manager (contact@seal-innovation.ch, 078 761 23 36)

