



Press Release

Breakthrough for two University of Tübingen AI startups

Ontic Labs and Feyer each to receive three million euros as they reach second round of Europe-wide competition

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Two artificial intelligence startup companies from Tübingen have come through the first round of the German government's Next Frontier AI Challenge. Ontic Labs and Feyer are now among the three German teams – out of a total of ten selected across Europe – which will each receive an initial three million euros for growth and development from the Federal Agency for Breakthrough Innovation known by its German acronym, SPRIND. Both companies are linked to the University of Tübingen's AI Center and the cluster of excellence in Machine Learning, and with the Cyber Valley Innovation Campus.

The Next Frontier AI Challenge is aimed at new European companies developing basic AI technologies with exceptionally high innovation potential and which could have a long-term economic and social impact. The goal is to build three European AI startups within 24 months which will be valued in the billions after successful funding and two further stages of the competition.

Machines that understand the physical world

Ontic Labs is developing a model designed to help machines understand physical contexts. While today's AI models primarily focus on capturing what the world looks like, Ontic Labs' technology seeks to learn how it works; this will enable its robots to interact in more complex ways with their environment. "We're developing a foundational model that learns how the world works physically from videos and experiences. Our goal is to be able to train robots using this model," says Georg Martius, co-founder of Ontic Labs and University of Tübingen professor. "This will lay the groundwork for more versatile robotic systems that can be deployed in a wide variety of fields in the future."

Ontic Labs GmbH

Founders: Dr. Omid Taheri, Mikel Zhobro, Dr. Wieland Brendel, Prof. Dr. Georg Martius, Prof. Dr. Gerard Pons-Moll

Participating institutions: Max Planck Institute for Intelligent Systems, Machine Learning: New Perspectives for Science cluster of excellence and AI Center Tübingen (both University of Tübingen), ELLIS Institute Tübingen

www.onticlabs.io

AI driving development of industrial hardware

Feyer develops AI systems able to design novel industrial hardware. By combining AI methods with physical simulations, the aim is to develop and evaluate new technical concepts more quickly. “For more than ten years, we have been developing AI systems that autonomously design new physical experiments and technologies in basic research, ranging from quantum systems and novel microscopes to gravitational wave detectors,” says Mario Krenn, Feyer scientific director and Professor of Machine Learning at the University of Tübingen. “Feyer is making it possible to transfer this technology to industrial applications. It has the potential to become a key driver of unexpected hardware innovations in Europe’s high-tech sector: from laser, quantum, and microscopy technologies to microchip production and new solutions for the energy sector.”

Feyer GmbH

Founders: Jonathan Klimesch, Sören Arlt, Prof. Dr. Mario Krenn

Participating institutions: Machine Learning: New Perspectives for Science cluster of excellence and AI Center Tübingen (both University of Tübingen)

www.feyer.ai

Peter Gehler, Professor of Machine Learning Engineering and Technology Transfer at the Tübingen AI Center, supported the teams with their applications. “The fact that two teams from our community are among the projects selected across Europe sends a strong signal about AI transfer in Tübingen,” he says. “Our research not only produces cutting-edge scientific achievements but increasingly also companies that have the potential to transform entire industries. This success demonstrates that the innovation ecosystem in Tübingen is working exceptionally well.”

“This success in the Next Frontier AI SPRIND Challenge demonstrates Tübingen’s international competitiveness as a center of research and innovation,” said University President Karla Pollmann. “Tübingen and the Baden-Württemberg region is now one of the most dynamic AI hubs in Europe: In the Cyber Valley Innovation Campus startup network alone, there are over 100 new AI and robotics companies, and the number is growing.”

SPRIND Challenges

SPRIND Challenges are competitions in which participating teams receive rapid and streamlined financial support to develop innovative solutions to the major social and technological challenges of our time. In SPRIND Challenges, teams compete in a multi-stage competition. At the end of each stage, the teams’ work is evaluated, and only the best teams remain in the competition and receive further financial support.

Federal Agency for Breakthrough Innovation press release (in German) [Pressemitteilung der Bundesagentur für Sprunginnovationen](#)

Tübingen AI Center

The Tübingen AI Center is a University of Tübingen research institution in cooperation with the Max Planck Institute for Intelligent Systems (MPI-IS). Researchers there are developing reliable learning systems to benefit society and the economy. The center has more than 300 scientists working in 33 research groups. As part of the recently-founded ELIAS alliance, they are cooperating with other researchers in Europe to contribute to socially beneficial technologies under the banner of “AI made in Europe.” The Tübingen AI Center works closely with the Tübingen ELLIS Institute and the Cyber Valley Innovation Campus. It is funded by the State of Baden-Württemberg’s research ministry and the German Ministry of Research, Technology, and Space.

Machine Learning: New Perspectives for Science cluster of excellence

The University of Tübingen cluster of excellence Machine Learning: New Perspectives for Science seeks to advance scientific discoveries through the use of machine learning. The cluster, sponsored by the German Research Foundation (DFG) since 2019 brings together leading researchers who develop and apply computer algorithms to gain new insights across a broad spectrum of scientific disciplines, from studying the fundamental building blocks of the brain to deepening our understanding of gravitational waves.

ELLIS Institute

Founded in 2023, the ELLIS Institute quickly established itself as a leading center for basic AI research. With state-of-the-art infrastructure, the institute attracts outstanding talent in the field of machine learning from around the world to Tübingen. Its mission is to advance groundbreaking AI research while making a key contribution to the European ELLIS initiative. By combining scientific excellence with social relevance, the institute is shaping the future of AI in Europe and beyond through innovation, interdisciplinary collaboration, and the cultivation of the next generation of leaders in AI research.

Cyber Valley Innovation Campus

Cyber Valley is one of the biggest leading centers for artificial intelligence and modern robotics in Europe. Based in Baden-Württemberg, Cyber Valley comprises a dynamic ecosystem that brings together experts from academia, industry, and the wider society to exchange ideas, advance outstanding research, and effectively transfer it into practice. Cyber Valley’s mission is the research, development, application, and acceptance of AI and robotics, while taking ethical considerations and social impact into account. Cyber Valley attracts top talent to Baden-Württemberg and turns AI research toward a sustainable future for everyone.



Left to right: Mikel Zhobro, Professor Gerard Pons-Moll, Professor Georg Martius, Dr. Wieland Brendel and Dr. Omid Taheri of Ontic Labs

Photo: Felix Adler / SPRIND



Left to right: Feyer founders Sören Arlt, Jonathan Klimesch and Professor Mario Krenn

Photo: Felix Adler / SPRIND

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