

## YOUNG ACADEMICS AWARD 2026

### **The Alpine water cycle and cryosphere in a changing climate: dynamics, impacts, and responses**

Research and innovation are key elements for a more sustainable development of the Alps. Young scientists and researchers play a crucial role in this, helping to shape the future of this unique mountain environment. The Young Academics Award recognises this role by rewarding outstanding master's theses on relevant Alpine topics. This edition is an initiative of the Permanent Secretariat of the Alpine Convention and the International Scientific Committee on Research in the Alps (ISCAR). It is supported by the Italian Presidency of the Alpine Convention, hosted by the Ministry of Environment and Energy Security (MASE), and the Department of Regional Affairs and Autonomies of the Italian Government (DARA). Additional support is provided by the Alpine Convention Infopoints of Chamonix (FR), Domodossola (IT), Koroška (SI), Mojstrana (SI), Ötscher-Tormäuer (AT), Sonthofen (DE), Tolmin (SI), and Villach (AT), and the Virtual Alpine Observatory (VAO) and the University of Aosta Valley.

#### **The Alpine water cycle and cryosphere in a changing climate: dynamics, impacts, and responses**

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Drinking, cooking, cleaning, washing – water is an ever-present part of our daily lives. It is used in agriculture, the production of consumer goods, and energy generation, as well as being a source of recreation and leisure. A large portion of the available fresh water on the European continent originates in the Alps, which are often referred to as the 'water towers of Europe'. They create, collect, and store precipitation, becoming a basis of life in the Alpine region and beyond. Part of this precipitation is incorporated into the Alpine cryosphere – including glaciers, permafrost, and snow cover – from which it is gradually released over time, providing fresh water throughout the entire year.

For centuries, glacier-fed streams have been vital centres of human life and activity in the Alps. However, these seemingly vast sources of freshwater are under serious threat. Climate change has driven up Alpine temperatures at a much faster rate than the global average, putting glaciers and permafrost at risk. Already today there are conflicts of interest surrounding the use of freshwater resources in the Alpine region. Various stakeholders – including agriculture, hydropower, tourism, and local communities – pursue different and often competing goals. Climate change is intensifying this competition and increasing the pressure on already limited water supplies. At the same time, it creates additional challenges such as the increased risk of water-related natural hazards, which are linked to the rapid transformation of the Alpine environment.

To safeguard the availability and quality of freshwater in the Alps and to ensure resilience and sustainable development in the future, the need for innovative solutions has become more urgent than ever. The pressures on the Alpine water cycle and cryosphere, along with the resulting challenges, make effective water management increasingly necessary. For this reason, the eighth edition of the Young Academics Award (YAA) is dedicated to the theme of understanding, protecting, and managing the Alpine water cycle and cryosphere.

We look forward to receiving creative and forward-thinking contributions from young researchers whose master's theses focus on the Alps or surrounding territories, addressing one or a combination of the following topics from an Alpine perspective<sup>1</sup>:

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<sup>1</sup> The list is non-exhaustive. Theses on other closely related sub-topics may be submitted.

- **Dynamics**
  - Water cycle: changes in seasonal and regional water availability, including risks of water scarcity, shifts in runoff regimes, altered melting patterns
  - Cryosphere: glacier retreat and loss, permafrost thaw, snow cover dynamics, climate projections and future scenarios for the Alpine cryosphere
- **Impacts**
  - Nature and ecosystems: impacts on biodiversity and species composition, habitat loss for cold-adapted species, emergence of post-glacial ecosystems and new lakes, ecological succession
  - Natural hazards: reduced slope and rockface stability, water-related hazards, glacial and periglacial hazards, impacts on infrastructure and settlements, changing frequency and intensity of hazard events, compound and cascading risks
- **Responses**
  - Technical measures: monitoring and forecasting systems, mitigation and resilience measures, prevention and adaptation strategies, nature-based solutions
  - Social dimensions: integrated governance and stakeholder participation, education and awareness-raising, policy frameworks, community-based adaptation

## The prizes

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**Three main prizes<sup>2</sup>** will be awarded to works with Alpine-wide relevance:

- 1<sup>st</sup> prize: €1.000
- 2<sup>nd</sup> prize: €750
- 3<sup>rd</sup> prize: €500

**Nine additional prizes<sup>2</sup>** will be awarded by our partners.

The **Infopoint prizes** will be presented to works that are thematically relevant and have a main and/or specific focus on the areas where the following Infopoints of the Alpine Convention are situated and active:

- Infopoint Chamonix (FR): €500 awarded by the [Community of Communes of the Valley of Chamonix Mont-Blanc](#)
- Infopoint Domodossola (IT): **two nights for two people** with half-board in Domodossola (IT) awarded by the association [ARS.UNI.VCO](#)
- Infopoint Koroška (SI): €500 awarded by the [Regional Development Agency for Koroška](#)
- Infopoint Mojstrana (SI): **three nights for two people** with half-board in the Aljaž Hut in the **Vrata Valley (SI)** awarded by the [Slovenian Alpine Museum](#)
- Infopoint Ötztal-Tormäuer (AT): **two nights for two people at the Schutzhaus Vorderötztal (AT)** awarded by the [Ötztal-Tormäuer Nature Park](#)
- Infopoint Sonthofen (DE): €750 awarded by the [town of Sonthofen](#)
- Infopoint Tolmin (SI): €500 awarded by the [Soča Valley Development Center](#)
- Infopoint Villach (AT): €600 and **one overnight for two people** with breakfast in the **Dobrattsch Gipfelhaus (AT)** awarded by the [Infopoint of the Dobratsch Nature Park](#)

Additionally, a **special prize of the Virtual Alpine Observatory** will be awarded to a thesis focusing on measurements and observations at mountain stations (e.g. monitoring, forecasting, early-warning systems, etc.). This award entails **an overnight stay** at the **Environmental Research Station Schneefernerhaus** at **Zugspitze (DE)** and exchange with its resident researchers.

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<sup>2</sup>In the case of financial prizes, the winners are responsible for paying their own national / local / income / social security and any other taxes/duties in accordance with applicable tax payment regulations for the transferred sum.

## Requirements and selection process

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The following requirements must be met in order to participate in the award:

- the submitted work must be a master's thesis (or equivalent level)
- candidates must have achieved the corresponding master's degree (second-cycle academic education) between 1 January 2023 and by 31 July 2026<sup>3</sup>
- the thesis must be written in English, French, German, Italian or Slovenian
- the thesis must have relevance to the topic and the [geographic area](#) of the Award.

The submitted theses will be evaluated by an international scientific jury selected by the Alpine Convention. The decisions of the jury are final and not contestable.

The selection process is conducted in two phases.

In the **first phase**, the pre-selection, the participants' work will be assessed based on the evaluation of the submitted documents (see section *How to apply*) in accordance with the following criteria:

- direct relevance of the thesis to the topics and sub-topics stated in the call as well as to the entire Alpine Convention territory and processes
- relevance and originality of the analysis and its theoretical contributions to further research
- capacity to propose innovative, practical, comprehensive, and Alpine-specific solutions
- academic value, interdisciplinarity, originality, clarity.

In the **second phase**, a maximum of 8 finalists for the main prize category will be invited to the *finalists' workshop* to be held in Italy in the framework of the next [Alpine Conference](#). Here, they will have the opportunity to present their work and discuss directly with the jury. On the same day, the jury will decide on the winners who will be announced and awarded in the presence of the ministers participating in the Alpine Conference.

The winners of the special prizes will also be invited to the award ceremony. The special prizes will be awarded solely to works that focus specifically on the topics/territories mentioned above, while at the same time fulfilling the general thematic and quality criteria. Should these conditions not be met, the prizes offered by the partners of the Alpine Convention may not be awarded.

A candidate can **either** be awarded a special prize **or** a main prize.

## How to apply

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### First phase

In order to participate, candidates are invited to complete the [online application form](#) in English language in all its parts by **31 July 2026**, attaching to it:

1. a digital copy (in pdf format) of the complete work in one of the Alpine languages (German, French, Italian, Slovenian) or English
2. a copy of the graduation certification with the final mark. If the student has not yet graduated, the candidate will need to present a declaration with the foreseen date of the graduation during the application process.

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<sup>3</sup> In case the candidate has not yet finished their studies but will defend their thesis/take the final exam by latest 30 September 2026, they are still allowed to apply. However, the submitted thesis must be in the final draft version with all of the content clearly developed. The candidate will need to follow up with proof of graduation after the application deadline.

## Second phase

The finalists will be asked to present their thesis in the finalists' workshop and to prepare a visual/graphic presentation of their work to be presented in the context of the Alpine Conference and other events, as well as for digital distribution (more details will be provided at a later stage). Moreover, applicants need to be available to travel on the dates of the workshop, held on the sidelines of the Alpine Conference. The award ceremony will take place on this occasion, and the travel and overnight costs will be reimbursed.

## Deadlines

Deadline for applications: **31 July 2026, midnight CET**

Notification to successful applicants for the second phase: during **December 2026**

Workshop and award ceremony: during the **XIX Alpine Conference** (Italy, 20 January 2027)

## Early bird submissions: Participation in ForumAlpinum Summer School

All candidates who submit their application by **31 March 2026** are also eligible to receive one of the ten free admissions to the Summer School organised in the scope of [ForumAlpinum 2026](#) on the topic of 'Alpine communities and territories in a time of glacier loss and climate change', taking place from 25-28 May 2026 in Aosta (IT). The selection will be made by the Scientific Committee of the Forum Alpinum by 17 April 2026. Candidates should indicate their interest in the application form. More information about the Summer School is available [here](#).

## Contact

For any questions, please contact [yaa@alpconv.org](mailto:yaa@alpconv.org).

### Further information:

<https://www.alpconv.org/en/home/projects/young-academics-award/>

### Online application form:

[www.alpconv.org/en/home/projects/young-academics-award/yaa-application/](http://www.alpconv.org/en/home/projects/young-academics-award/yaa-application/)

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