

Dear UNITE Members,

Welcome to the 6<sup>th</sup> edition of the UNITE Newsletter!

We are happy to share recent highlights, including a [recap of our retreats, seminar series](#) and the latest [updates from research](#). This edition also features a curated overview of [upcoming UNITE events](#) and [Travel grants](#), alongside short introductions to the [newest members of the UNITE staff](#).

We hope you enjoy reading the latest news and look forward to the continued progress we'll achieve together!

Best wishes, UNITE Project Management Team

## CONGRATULATIONS



We are pleased to announce that **Wolfgang Wick (A03)** and **Michael Platten (B01)** are among the [“Highly cited Researchers 2025”](#). Their publications rank among the most frequently cited worldwide, highlighting the depth of their scientific influence and the lasting impact of their research contributions. **Wolfgang Wick** has also been re-elected as [Chair of the German Science and Humanities Council \(WR\)](#), commencing his fourth term of office.

Warm congratulations to **Tobias Kessler (A03)** for being awarded a position in the [Advanced Clinician Scientist Program](#) at the Medical Faculty Heidelberg (MFHD).

We would like to extend our sincere congratulations to **Dirk Hoffmann (A03)** on receiving the [2025 Richtzenhain Doctoral Prize](#) in recognition of their outstanding doctoral theses.

We warmly congratulate **Felix Sahm (A06)** on receiving the [EANO Research Award 2025](#). This award recognizes his outstanding contributions to basic, translational, and clinical research in neuro-oncology and neuropathology.

It is with great pleasure that we announce that **Varun Venkataramani (A07)** has been honored as one of the

recipients of the [Lisec-Artz Prize 2025](#), as well as the [Paul Ehrlich & Ludwig Darmstädter Early Career Award 2026](#), in recognition of his distinguished contributions to cancer research and his innovative work advancing therapeutic developments. Moreover, he has been selected by the European Molecular Biology Organization (EMBO) for the prestigious [Young Investigator Program](#).

Congratulations to **Lukas Bunse (B03)** on his appointment as [Professor of neuroimmunology and cell therapy and section head](#) at the Neuro- Oncology Unit of the Neurology Clinic in Mannheim. Furthermore, he is the recipient of the [DGN Science Award 2025](#), as well as the [Lautenschläger Award](#) and the [Berlin Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities Prize](#), recognizing his outstanding contributions to neuroimmunology and innovative immunotherapy approaches for brain tumors.

We are delighted to announce that **Barnabás Németh (B03)** has been selected as one of the winners of the [2025 Heidelberg MERFISH 2.0™ Grant Program](#), presented in partnership with scOpenLab.



## NEWS FROM RESEARCH



Building on the promising clinical results of the NOA16 trial, funding has now been granted for **STAR VACC**, a randomized phase II study **evaluating the clinical efficacy of the IDH1 vaccine in newly diagnosed astrocytomas**. Planned to begin in mid 2026, the trial marks a significant step for **Michael Platten (B01) and his team** towards advancing a promising therapeutic approach with the potential to meaningfully improve patient outcomes.

In addition to this achievement, **Michael Platten** is receiving an **ERC Proof of Concept Grant** to advance *predicTCR*, an AI-based classifier developed in earlier ERC-supported research for the rapid identification of tumor-reactive T-cell receptors. His Proof of Concept project, **AI-TreatCancer**, aims to **translate this algorithm into a validated, fully automated workflow suitable for clinical application** and to support the development of standardized receptor-engineered T-cell therapies for use across multiple cancer types. The grant provides 150,000 euros over a period of one and a half years.

Another ERC-funded initiative appoints **Amir Abdollahi (C05)** as leader of the Heidelberg subgroup within the international consortium **PRECISION ImmunoRad**. A multidisciplinary team is developing new curative strategies for hard-to-treat tumors by **combining high-precision ion beam therapy with CAR-T cells, personalized cancer vaccines, and targeted tumor immune-microenvironment reprogramming**. The ERC supports the Synergy Grant, coordinated by the Heidelberg Medical Faculty, with €14 million over six years, €5.5 million of which is allocated to Heidelberg.



## OUTREACH



The **Department of Neuropathology** has launched a new **podcast series** dedicated to making cutting-edge research more accessible to clinicians, scientists, and interested professionals.

**Felix Sahm (A06)** was invited as a guest speaker on the **Precision Pathology Podcast (UPenn)** to discuss recent advances in rapid and accessible molecular profiling for CNS tumors. The podcast covered nanopore-based intra-operative diagnostics, the MNP-flex platform, and future roles of AI in pathology.

February 4 marked **World Cancer Day**, a dedicated occasion to highlight the global burden of cancer and the importance of sustained scientific progress. The department of neuro-oncology shared a **recap video** of the **UNITE conference** held in May 2025, providing an opportunity to revisit these important discussions and to continue raising awareness for glioblastoma research.

## GE & FF- SURVEY

To plan **Diversity, Gender Equality (GE) & Family Friendly (FF) Measures** for the 2<sup>nd</sup> funding phase and align them with your needs, we conducted an **annual survey**. It assessed **potential workshop topics** and **support structures**, providing essential input for developing targeted measures.

The survey highlighted **three preferred workshop topics** (conflict management, unconscious bias, career paths), a clear preference for **online formats during working hours**, and a strong interest in **individual coaching sessions** and **student assistants** as supporting measures for 2026.

We are planning a workshop for 2026 as part of our GE & FF- measures. If you have any suggestions for speakers or related contributions, please send them to us via email at [sfb1389@med.uniheidelberg.de](mailto:sfb1389@med.uniheidelberg.de). Thank you for your continued collaboration and participation!

## IMPRINT

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# SAVE THE DATE



## UNITE Seminar Series

**Speaker:** Anna Dimberg, Uppsala University  
**When:** April 16, 2026, 10:15 a.m. – 11:15 a.m.  
**Where:** Seminar Room 3 (Chirurgische Klinik)  
**Title:** tbd

**Speaker:** Franziska Blaeschke, Hopp-Kindertumorzentrum Heidelberg (KITZ)  
**When:** June 25, 2026, 10:15 a.m. – 11:15 a.m.  
**Where:** Seminar Room 2 (Chirurgische Klinik)  
**Title:** “Pooled CRISPR Screens: Reprogramming Therapeutic T Cells”

# HARVARD-HEIDELBERG-ALLIANCE

The **8<sup>th</sup> HARVARD – HEIDELBERG ALLIANCE IN NEURO-ONCOLOGY meeting** took place on October 23-24 at the **International Academic Forum (IWH)**. We were pleased to welcome our colleagues from Boston for two days of scientific exchange and international collaboration. Following the opening by Wolfgang Wick and Tracy Batchelor, the program featured **32 speakers** addressing key areas of Neuro-oncology, including Cancer Neuroscience, Young Investigator Sessions, Molecular Diagnostics, IDH related research, Artificial Intelligence, and Clinical Trials. Valuable Contributions from both early career researchers and leading experts highlighted current developments and future directions in the field.



We would like to **thank all contributors for their engagement and dedicated exchange**. We look forward to the next Alliance meeting taking place **this year in Boston**, anticipating further scientific progress and continued joint achievements!

## UNITE SEMINAR SERIES

On January 22, we had the pleasure of welcoming **Moritz Mall** from the **German Cancer Research Center (DKFZ)** as a guest speaker to our seminar series. He delivered a compelling lecture titled: **“Uncovering Cellular Plasticity Regulators and Cell Fate Transitions in Glioblastoma with Single-Cell Multiomics”**.



We would like to take this opportunity and sincerely thank **Moritz Mall** for his valuable contributions and look forward to further discussions!





## FELLOW RETREAT

At the **Fellows Retreat** on November 7, 2025, participants attended a dedicated workshop on science communication through social media. Organized by the UNITE fellow representatives and led by **Shreya Ghosh**, **Communications Editor at EMBL**, the session drew on her extensive experience in science writing and public engagement. The workshop emphasized the importance of communicating research effectively to broader audiences and demonstrated how social media can be used strategically for outreach. Participants were introduced to key platforms, received guidance on developing a professional online presence, and engaged in practical exercises to refine their communication skills.



The session was met with **highly positive feedback**, with fellows highlighting the **relevance of the topic** and the **value of the hands-on approach**. Beyond the workshop, the retreat also offered opportunities for **networking and community building**.



## SCIENTIFIC RETREAT

The **Scientific Retreat** took place on December 16 at the Marsilius-Kolleg in Heidelberg and welcomed approximately **65 participants**, including UNITE PIs and fellows, guest speakers, as well as EKFS fellows.



The event served as a platform for scientific exchange, presenting a **comprehensive overview of the current status and the progress** achieved within each work package over the past year, and outlining the **strategic priorities and goals** for the upcoming year.



We wish to express our **sincere appreciation** for the **commitment and thoughtful contributions** of all participants! The retreat once again showed how much innovation and inspiration emerges from our collaborative work – bringing us another step closer to making glioblastoma treatable in the future.

## TRAVEL GRANTS



We are happy to announce the availability of travel grants for all UNITE fellows. Applications must be submitted by **March 31, 2026**.

Below you can find an overview of (selected) upcoming Neuro-Oncology conferences with important information:

### Neuro-Oncology:

[ICNO](#) | April 20-21 | Tokyo, Japan

[ASCO](#) | May 29-June 2 | Chicago, USA

[EACR](#) | June 8-11 | Budapest, Hungary

[BNOS](#) | July 1-3 | Birmingham, UK

[SNO/ASCO Metastases](#) | August 13-15 | Boston, USA

[Brain Conference: Cancer Neuroscience](#) | August 25-28 | Rungsted, Denmark

[EANO](#) | Sept 24-27 | Rome, Italy

[SNO](#) | Nov 12-15 | Philadelphia, USA

### Pediatric Neuro-Oncology:

[ISPNO](#) | June 28-July 1 | Sydney, Australia

### Neuropathology:

[AANP](#) | June 4-7 | Cambridge, UK

Please also check the conference websites for **non UNITE-related travel grant offers!** We recommend that you apply additionally as our budget for travel grants is limited.



## 360°-SURVEY

Our new 360° Survey on Interaction and Satisfaction started on January 28 and aims to gather feedback from all members to improve the UNITE school.

Should you not yet have completed the survey, we would like to take this opportunity to kindly remind you to do so by **March 31**, via the [following link](#). The survey will take approximately 5–10 minutes.

## COMPLETED DISSERTATIONS

David Vönhören (B01), March 12, 2026: “Metabolic rewiring in IDH1-mutant gliomas drives NK cell-mediated killing of tumor-reactive T cells”.

## SELECTED PUBLICATIONS



[Scheck, J. G., Boztepe, B., Kernbach, J. M., Karimian-Jazi, K., Heinz, L., Schregel, K., Sturm, V., Schell, M., Bojceviski, J., Fischer, M., Eurich, R., Poschke, I., Schwarz, J., Agardy, D. A., Jünger, S., Schulz, C., Althammer, F., Osidach, A. R., Abdollahi, A., Bunse, L., Venkataramani, V., Pfister, S. M., Winkler, F., Kessler, T., Wick, W., Heiland, S., Platten, M., Rodell, C., Bendszus, M., Weidenfeld, J., & Breckwoldt, M. O. \(2025\). Multimodality mapping of immunotherapy distribution as a predictive marker in glioma. Neuro-Oncology. Advance online publication.](#)

<https://doi.org/10.1093/neuonc/noaf295>

[Azorín, D. D., Hoffmann, D. C., Hebach, N. R., Jung, E., Hausmann, D., Ratliff, M., Hai, L., Horschitz, S., Jabali, A., Osswald, M., Karreman, M. A., Kessler, T., Wendler, S., Mayer, C. D., Löb, C., Lehnert, P., Cebulla, G., Reibold, D., Khajuria, R. K., Bordignon, P., Moor, A. E., Holland-Letz, T., Reckless, J., Ramsden, N., Grainger, D., Kreshuk, A., Koch, P., Wick, W., Heuer, S., & Winkler, F. \(2026\). Screening for tumor microtubule-targeting drugs identifies PKC modulators as multipotent inhibitors of glioblastoma progression. Cancer Discovery, 16\(2\), 367–390. <https://doi.org/10.1158/2159-8290.CD-24-0414>](#)

[Grassl, N., Suwala, A. K., Kessler, T., Bunse, L., Mildenerger, I., Breckwoldt, M. O., Ratliff, M., Brehmer, S., Herold-Mende, C., Etminan, N., Wick, W., Sahm, F., Platten, M., & Sahm, K. \(2026\). Early distant progression in adult Histone-3 K27-altered diffuse midline gliomas. Journal of neuro-oncology, 176\(2\), 166. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11060-025-05238-z>](#)

[Maas, S. L. N., ...Suwala, A., Patel, A., Reuss, D., ...Platten, M., ...Ratliff, M., ...Herold-Mende, C., ...Jones, D., Pfister, S., Wick, W., ...von Deimling, A., ...Schlesner, M., German “Aggressive Meningiomas” Consortium \(KAM\), & Sahm, F. \(2026\). A microenvironment-determined risk continuum refines subtyping in meningioma and reveals determinants of machine learning-based tumor classification. Nature Genetics, 58\(2\), 341–354. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41588-025-02475-w>](#)





Welcome to our UNITE-Team!

## NEW UNITE STAFF



**Cindy Bay (C01)** earned her bachelor's and master's degrees in molecular biotechnology at Heidelberg University. She currently pursues her doctorate at Heidelberg University Hospital under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Johanna Weiß in the Department of Clinical Pharmacology and Pharmacoepidemiology, in the

**Cindy Bay**

Analytical Chemistry Laboratory (ACL) of Dr. Jürgen Burhenne. Her research aims to **establish translational relevant in vitro analyses for evaluating drug blood-brain barrier (BBB) permeability and delivery strategies**. Her work contributes to identifying drug candidates overcoming the BBB for effective glioblastoma treatment. In UNITE, she will support the work of cooperation partners with sensitive drug quantification using UPLC-MS/MS.



**Stefania-Alexandra Iakab**

**Stefania-Alexandra Iakab (C04)** earned her Ph.D. in Technologies for Nanosystems, Bioengineering, and Energy at Rovira i Virgili University, Tarragona, Spain. She now leads spatial-omics research in Prof. Carsten Hopf's group at CeMOS, TH Mannheim, Germany, where she develops and applies advanced mass spectrometry imaging workflows

designed for 3D cell cultures. In UNITE, her research **uncovers molecular mechanisms driving crosstalk between metabolic and signaling pathways in glioblastoma**. This involves organoid models (Hai-Kun Liu, A08) integrated with spatial metabolomics, proteomics, and transcriptomics to probe tumor heterogeneity, microenvironmental interactions, and pathway dysregulation.

Horschitz, S., Jabali, A., Heuer, S., Zillich, E., Zillich, L., Hoffmann, D. C., Kumar, A. S., Hausmann, D., Azorin, D. D., Hai, L., Wick, W., Winkler, F., & Koch, P. (2026). Development of a fully human glioblastoma-in-brain-spheroid model for accelerated translational research. *Journal of advanced research*, 79, 363–377. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jare.2025.03.055>

Kourtesakis, A., Chow, H. N. H., Bailey, E., Horschitz, S., Jabali, A., Will, R., Schiffers, C., Suwala, A. K., Rohdjess, H., Hahn, M., Chih, Y.-C., Hai, L., Reibold, D., Pusch, S., Fischer, M., Sinn, R., Agardy, D. A., Hoffmann, D. C. F., Breckwoldt, M. O., Wagener, R., Kaulen, L., Koch, P., von Deimling, A., Bunse, L., Platten, M., Sahm, F., Müller-Tidow, C., Schmitt, M., Wick, W., Sauer, T., & Kessler, T. (2026). A comparative analysis of CD70-directed CAR-T cells for glioblastoma treatment demonstrates a superior efficacy of the ligand-based construct. *Molecular Therapy Oncology*, 34(1), Article 201134. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.omton.2026.201134>

Koch, M. S., Deo, M., Schmidt, C., Podolak, A., Taranda, J., Hoetker, M. S., & Turcan, S. (2026). KMT2A is a prerequisite of malignant transformation during IDH-mutant gliomagenesis. *Neuro-oncology*, noag006. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1093/neuonc/noag006>

Mahmutoglu, M. A., Rastogi, A., Yun, Y. C., Middha, S., Kernbach, J., Foltyn-Dumitru, M., Brugnara, G., Vollmuth, P., Radbruch, A., Bendszus, M., & Schell, M. (2026). Robust Brain Extraction Tool for Nonenhanced CT and CT Angiography: CTA-BET. *Radiology. Artificial intelligence*, 8(1), e240847. <https://doi.org/10.1148/ryai.240847>

Stojanovic, A., Giorgetta, S., Vonhören, D., Krieghoff-Henning, E. I., Platten, M., Loges, S., Tugues, S., & Cerwenka, A. (2026). Tissue-specific spatial regulation of innate immune checkpoints in cancer. *Cancer discovery*, 10.1158/2159-8290.CD-25-2112. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1158/2159-8290.CD-25-2112>

Karabogdan I, Yanqui-Rivera F, Sayeeram D, Sadik A, Miller AK, Trump S, Röhrig UF\*, and Opitz CA\* (\*contributed equally). Exploration of Agonist and Antagonist Binding Sites within the Cytosolic AHR Complex Using Molecular Modeling. *ACS Omega* (2026). <https://pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/acsomega.5c10598>