

Dear UNITE Members,

Welcome to the 7th edition of the UNITE Newsletter!

We are happy to share recent highlights, including a [recap of our seminar series](#), [experiences from our travel grant recipients](#) and the latest [updates from research](#). This edition also features a curated overview of [selected publications](#) and [upcoming UNITE events](#), 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

Warm congratulations to **Dirk Hoffmann (A03)** on receiving the [MTZ Award for Systems Medicine 2026](#), in recognition of his outstanding research into key vulnerabilities within glioblastoma tumor networks.

We are delighted to announce that **Felix Sahm (A06)** is one of the recipients of the [German Cancer Prize](#) in the Translational Research Category for Molecular Classification Systems for Brain Tumors. The Prize is awarded annually and is considered one of the highest distinctions in Oncology. Furthermore, we warmly congratulate him on his appointment as [Chief Medical Advisor](#) of Heidelberg Epignostix.

We are pleased to share the news that **Varun Venkataramani (A07)** has received an [ERC Starting Grant](#). Over the next five years, his project "BITE" will investigate how glioblastoma cells interact with and exploit neural networks in the brain, with the goal of identifying new therapeutic strategies.

We applaud **Aurélien Ernst (A08)** on being awarded a [DFG Heisenberg Professorship](#) to further her groundbreaking work in cancer genome research.

Congratulations to **Jonas Scheck (B06N)** on receiving a [research grant](#) from the Family Mehdorn Foundation for an interdisciplinary project advancing glioblastoma drug delivery using novel imaging technologies.

It is with great pleasure that we announce the appointment of **Stefan Pfister (C01)** as the [spokesperson](#) of the German Cancer Research Consortium (DKTK) for the 2026-20230 funding period. In his new role, he aims to strengthen collaborations across DKTK partner sites and accelerate the translation of research into clinical application. In addition to this achievement, his research has been awarded with the [Thomas and Doris Amman Prize](#) for his pioneering contributions to research into pediatric brain tumors.

Congratulations are extended to **Carsten Hopf (C03)** on his election as the new [Vice President for Research and Transfer](#) at TH Mannheim. Furthermore, he has secured €1.4 million in funding from the Carl Zeiss Foundation for his project ["AI-4-Spatial Multiomics Transfer"](#), designed to develop novel AI methods to improve tissue analysis from patients with multiple sclerosis and myositis over the next three years.

NEWS FROM RESEARCH



Two Horizon Europe projects coordinated by **Felix Sahm (A06)**, **EUcanAI** and **FutureMIND**, have received nearly €8 million in EU funding. EUcanAI aims to develop AI-supported tools for brain tumor care, from imaging and tissue analysis to treatment planning, while FutureMIND will equip early-career researchers with interdisciplinary expertise spanning research, clinical practice and artificial intelligence. In addition to these achievements, he contributed to the WHO/IARC 2026 Classification of Genetic Tumor Syndromes as an **invited responsible author**, focusing on SMARCE1-related meningioma predisposition syndrome. The new classification provides a comprehensive framework for hereditary cancer syndromes and is expected to support improved diagnosis, surveillance, and precision medicine worldwide. Furthermore, him and his team have developed **Hetairos**, an AI-powered system capable of classifying brain tumors from routine histopathological slides with unprecedented accuracy. Trained and validated on more than 11,000 digital tissue sections from 9,606 patients, the system can identify over 100 molecular subgroups of central nervous system tumors within minutes, offering the potential to accelerate precision diagnostics worldwide.

Isabell Bludau (D01) and her Team have introduced **ProteoPy**, a lightweight Python library for quantitative proteomics analysis built around AnnData. The platform supports peptide-level analyses to uncover proteoform-specific regulation and integrates seamlessly with established single-cell and multi-omics workflows.



OUTREACH



As recipient of the Brain Prize 2025, **Frank Winkler (A01)** was invited to present the **Brain Prize Lecture** at the EAN Congress 2026 in Geneva. He outlined how interactions between the nervous system and cancer influence tumor growth, disease progression, and patient outcomes, emphasizing the translational potential of this evolving field. His presentation was followed by a **video interview**, in which he shared insights into the rapidly evolving field of Cancer Neuroscience and discussed its transformative potential, as well as the opportunities for translating fundamental discoveries into clinical practice.

Reflecting the growing international interest in Cancer Neuroscience, **Matthia Karreman (A07)** was also invited as a **keynote speaker** at the British Neuro-Oncology Society (BNOS) Meeting, where she presented recent advances in the Cancer Neuroscience of Brain Metastases.

Further highlighting Heidelberg's international visibility in cancer research, **Stefan Pfister (C01)** **presented** at CLEPIC 2026 on methylation-based tumor classification using cell-of-origin fingerprints and their application in precision diagnostics.

Felix Sahm (A06) demonstrated recent advances in the WHO Classification of Central Nervous System Tumors at the **Padua Masterclass** in Neuro-Oncology 2026. His lecture addressed the evolving role of molecular profiling and its growing impact on precision diagnostics and treatment strategies.

SAVE THE DATE

[UNITE Scientific Retreat & SAB Meeting](#)

When: December 17th-18th, 2026

Where: Marsilius- Kolleg, INF 130.1

[Registration link ↗](#)



UNITE SEMINAR SERIES



On June 25th, we had the pleasure of welcoming **Franziska Blaeschke** from the **German Cancer Research Center (DKFZ)** as a guest speaker to our seminar series. She delivered a compelling lecture titled: **“Engineering immune cells with CRISPR”**.



On May 4th, the series of guest lectures also featured **Itay Tirosh** from the **Weizmann Institute of Science**. His presentation provided titled: **“Spatial analysis of glioma cells”**, provided valuable insights glioma progression and tumor heterogeneity by exploring the spatial distribution and organization of glioma cells.



APPRECIATION SPOTLIGHT



We would like to take this opportunity to express our **sincere gratitude** to everyone who supported us during the **preparation of the preproposal**. Your valuable contributions, commitment, and support were greatly appreciated and played an important role in the process. We look forward to continuing our collaboration!

WORKSHOPS @CAMPUS HD

hei INNOVATION facilitates the translation of research outcomes into societal and technological application. All events are advertised in their monthly **newsletter**, such as **workshops on entrepreneurial skills, female founders brunches** and more. If **diversity, equality, and inclusion** are topics of interest to you, we encourage you to explore **UNIFY**, the University's central office. We would also like to introduce the **Heidelberg University Postdoc Network**, which provides Postdocs a platform for networking, collaboration, & community. HUPs organizes events, like Coffee & Careers talks, seminars on funding opportunities, career development & mental wellbeing, as well as social gatherings like picnics.

360°-SURVEY - RESULTS

In Q1 2026, data collection for the 360°- Survey on interaction and satisfaction was conducted. Focusing on Meetings & workshops, GE & FF-Measures, School, Management & Communication, Additional Feedback A total of 29 fully completed questionnaires were included in the final analysis:

- High survey participation from long-standing PIs & fellows, limited representation of MD students
- Awareness of our Gender Equality and Family-Friendly (GE&FF) measures remains high. The most helpful measures include student assistants, HO-Equipment and workshops.
- PIs have a positive perception of current events, the use of review meetings and the mentorship structure, with respect to fellows needs.
- A broad positive consensus exists among fellows regarding the value of review meetings and the mentorship provided by their PIs
- Overall, all members expressed a positive view of the value, structure and organization of UNITE school events, including retreats, workshops, and meetings
- Suggestions for improvement:
 - More hybrid format options, Expansion of workshop offerings tailored more closely to fellows needs, Career development opportunities for the fellow retreat, Active presence of PIs and stronger encouragement from senior staff to attend



TRAVEL GRANT CONFERENCES

The recipients of this year's travel grants had the opportunity to attend **international conferences** and provide an overview of their **experiences, key learnings and highlights**.

Cancer Neuroscience: Melina Müller (A01)
International Cancer Neuroscience Symposium |
 February 18-February 20 | Houston, USA

In February, I was invited to present my work in the "Inflamed Scientist Elevator Pitch Session." The meeting combined outstanding science with a welcoming and interactive atmosphere, bringing together leading researchers such as James P. Allison and Douglas Hanahan while offering valuable opportunities for exchange and networking. Particularly inspiring were the discussions on cancer neuroscience, neuron–cancer interactions, and the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration and mentorship. Overall, the experience highlighted the value of international exchange and supportive research communities for early-career scientists.



Neuro- Oncology: Nathalie Große (A04)
BNOS | July 1-3 | Birmingham, UK

The conference featured a diverse scientific program comprising poster sessions and oral presentations on a broad range of neuro-oncological topics. While the primary focus was clinical, the integration of biological mechanisms and basic research provided valuable interdisciplinary perspectives. The program was complemented by several networking and outreach activities, including a gala dinner, a tour of the University's Boron Neutron Capture Therapy facility, and a 5K run through Birmingham. A particular highlight for me was the imaging session on July 2nd, which closely aligned with my research interests. I also had the opportunity to present my PhD project, which was my first oral presentation at an international conference of this scale. Beyond the conference, Birmingham proved to be a vibrant and welcoming city with a strong scientific and medical community, making it a worthwhile destination both academically and culturally.

"The experience enabled engaging scientific discussions and valuable exchanges with researchers from diverse backgrounds."



"The conference provided valuable feedback on my work, helped me better identify the most pressing research questions, and kept me motivated during the manuscript-writing phase."





Neuro- Oncology: Dennis Agardy (B01)
ASNO | June 12-June 14 | Kanazawa, Japan



The conference brought together scientists and clinicians in neuro-oncology, providing an excellent platform for scientific exchange and international networking. I presented my research on radiotherapy-induced immune responses in glioma, focusing on the role of XAF1 in myeloid-cell function, and received valuable feedback on our findings, underlying mechanisms and promising directions for future experiments. A particularly valuable aspect was the opportunity to connect with researchers from Japan and other Asian countries, providing a basis for future scientific exchange, collaborative projects, and experimental resources.

"I established numerous new contacts with researchers working in neuro-oncology and tumor immunology, thereby expanding my international scientific network within the field."



Pediatric Neuro- Oncology: Luisa Kües (A01)
ISPNO | June 28-July 1 | Sydney, Australia

Attending the International Symposium on Paediatric Neuro-Oncology (ISPNO) was a highly valuable experience, and I am very grateful to UNITE for the financial support that made my participation possible. I had the opportunity to present my doctoral research on tumour microtubule networks and calcium dynamics in diffuse midline glioma as both a poster and a short talk, and to discuss it with an international audience of researchers and clinicians.



"The scientific discussions, exciting unpublished findings and feedback I received have provided new insights for the final phase of my doctoral project and further strengthened my motivation to continue my research for a childhood life without cancer."





COMPLETED DISSERTATIONS

Cindy Bay (C01), June 16th, 2026: "Entwicklung und Validierung eines 3D-Blut-Hirnschranken-Organoid-Modells zur Identifizierung neuer Therapeutika und drug delivery-Strategien zur Behandlung von Hirntumoren".

Federica Ciamarone (C05), July 27th, 2026: "High-LET Ultra-High Dose-Rate Carbon Ion Irradiation Reprograms the Glioblastoma Tumor Immune Microenvironment and Generates CD8+ T Cell-Dependent Long-Term Antitumoral Immunity".

UNITE FELLOW COMMITTEE

We would like to take this opportunity to thank all UNITE Fellow Committee Members for their great support during this funding period! In the past, the committee consisting of Nathalie Schoebe (A06), Khwab Sanghi (C04) and Jennifer Furkel (C05) have built structures through which networking activities for our Fellows were made possible.



As the committee currently consists of only two fellows, we are looking for committed Fellows who would like to take over and continue this important work!

If you are a UNITE Fellow and would like to actively participate in our CRC, organize Fellow Events and further develop the School with us, please get in touch with us: sfb1389@med.uni-Heidelberg.de

NEW UNITE STAFF



Felix Weidner (A01) is a medical student at Heidelberg University currently pursuing his MD thesis in the lab of Prof. Frank Winkler under the supervision of Dr. Sophie Heuer. His research focuses on targeting pacemaker-like glioblastoma cells using a

novel KCa3.1 inhibitor to disrupt tumor-intrinsic calcium signaling. By combining this approach with standard-of-care therapies, he aims to **overcome resistance mechanisms in glioblastoma and ultimately improve patient outcomes through a translational research approach**. He is enthusiastic about being part of UNITE and is looking forward to the dynamic scientific exchange, as well as the opportunity to connect with inspiring researchers.



Nasser Drechsler (A03) is a medical student working on his MD thesis under the supervision of PD Dr. Tobias Kessler in the Neurology Department of Heidelberg University Hospital. His research focuses on **specific kinase inhibition in Glioblastoma to remodel the Tumor Microenvironment, subsequently improving long-term CAR-T prolifera-**

tion and anti-tumor activity. With a focus on immunology, metabolomics and proteomics as well as complex cell culture, several cooperations with other UNITE members are currently pursued. He would consider his mother as his role model, as she embodies the indomitable human spirit linked with forthcoming kindness, qualities he aspires as a future scientist and physician.



Depro Das (B03) completed his B.Sc. and M.Sc. in Biochemistry and Molecular Biology at the University of Dhaka and later worked in the Department of Neurosurgery at Freiburg University Hospital. During his master's research, he used spatial transcriptomics to investigate the invasive margins of 5-ALA-positive glioblastoma and later

gained research experience in IDH-mutant glioma and meningioma. He is currently pursuing his doctoral studies under the supervision of Dr. Abigail Suwala and Dr. Stefan Pusch within Work Package B03, **investigating the regulatory landscape underlying IDH mutant astrocytoma progression through multi-omics integration**.





SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

Brehmer, S., Sarria, G. R., ...7 Authors..., Etminan, N., & Giordano, F. A. (2026). Intraoperative radiotherapy after resection of newly diagnosed brain metastases in adult patients - results of a prospective phase II trial (INTRAMET). *Journal of neuro-oncology*, 178(1), 28. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11060-026-05649-6>

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Giordano, F. A., Ganslandt, O., ...21 Authors..., Petrecca, K., & INTRAGO-II Study Group (2026). Dose escalation with intraoperative radiotherapy in newly diagnosed glioblastoma (INTRAGO-II): an open-label, multicentre, randomised, controlled, phase 3 trial. *The Lancet Oncology*, 27(7), 864–878. <https://doi.org/10.1016/>

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Jassowicz, L., Feng, F., Warta, R., Heinicke, F., Wöllner, A., ...3 Authors..., Lotsch, C., Wong, J. K. L., Park, C. G., ...23 Authors..., Abdollahi, A., von Deimling, A., ...5 Authors..., Seiffert, M., & Herold-Mende, C. (2026). Dissecting the cellular architecture of breast cancer brain metastases reveals prognostically distinct immune landscapes. *Cancer Cell*, S1535-6108(26)00170-4. <https://doi.org/10.1016>

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Karreman, M. A., & Winkler, F. (2026). Checkpoint Breaches: Unexpected Effects of Anti-PD-1 Therapy on the Blood-Brain Barrier. *Cancer Discovery*, 16(5), 831–833. <https://doi.org/10.1158/2159-8290.CD-26-0417>

Karschnia, P., Teske, N., ...8 Authors..., Wick, W., ...9 Authors..., Weller, M., Tonn, J.-C. (2026). Discrepancies in Inter-Rater Agreement on Resectability of Recurrent Glioblastoma: Complementary Post-hoc Analysis of the Prospective, Randomized DIRECTOR Trial. *Neuro-Oncology*, noag103. <https://doi.org/10.1093/>

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