Robert J. Johannes
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February 12, 2026

NBER Innovation Research Boot Camp 2026
Selection Committee

Dear Professors Bryan, Ganguli, and Myers,

I am writing to apply for the NBER Innovation Research Boot Camp 2026. I am a third-year PhD student in Economics at LMU Munich and have completed more than two years of PhD coursework.

My recommendation letter writer is Professor Fabian Waldinger (LMU Munich).

My research examines whether cross-disciplinary interactions expand the effective idea space and increase the production of genuinely high-impact work. This question is central to how research environments are structured and how innovation policy seeks to foster breakthroughs. Many landmark advances appear to stem from cross-field exchange, yet credible evidence is scarce because such encounters are typically endogenous, with individuals sorting into collaborators and institutions. I study this question in a unique historical setting that brings elite creators from multiple disciplines into sustained contact under fixed rules and resources, allowing me to observe both creative output and multiple lenses of impact.

The NBER Innovation Research Boot Camp is the ideal forum to sharpen how this evidence speaks to the economics of innovation. It offers exactly the kind of concentrated exposure to frontier work and informal feedback that will help me refine the project's measurement strategy and positioning in the innovation literature.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Robert J. Johannes

ROBERT J. JOHANNES

robert.johannes@econ.lmu.de

Research Interests

Economics of Innovation; Cultural Economics; Economic History

Education

2023–	PhD in Economics, LMU Munich
2022–2023	M.Sc. in Economics, London School of Economics
2020–2022	B.A. in Art History, LMU Munich
2017–2020	B.Sc. in Economics, LMU Munich

Working Papers

From Sticks to Bricks: Construction Technology and Medieval Urban Development

Work in Progress

Curating Creativity: How Cross-Disciplinary Interactions Shape Creative Production

Research Experience

2019–2021	Research Assistant to Prof. Fabian Waldinger, LMU Munich

Teaching Experience

Winter 2025/26	Graduate Teaching Assistant, Econometrics 2, LMU Munich
Summer 2025	Graduate Teaching Assistant, Econometrics 2, LMU Munich
Winter 2024/25	Graduate Teaching Assistant, Econometrics 2, LMU Munich
Summer 2024	Graduate Teaching Assistant, Managerial Economics 2, LMU Munich
Winter 2019/20	Undergraduate Teaching Assistant, Microeconomics 1, LMU Munich
Summer 2019	Undergraduate Teaching Assistant, Microeconomics 2, LMU Munich

Fellowships and Funding

2024–2026	Joachim Herz Add-on Fellowship for Interdisciplinary Economics
2023–2026	Egon Sohmen Fellowship for Graduate Studies
2018–2020	Munich Honors Program in Economics
2018–2020	Member of the ECONnect Program
2017–2023	German National Academic Scholarship Foundation

Prizes and Awards

Summer 2020	Prize for best performance in the B.Sc. in Economics, LMU Munich
Summer 2017	Prize of the German Physics Association for A-level performance

Presentations

2026 (scheduled)	Brown Bag Economics of Innovation Seminar (Collège de France / PSE / INSEAD), Paris
2025	LMU Munich Empirical Student Brown Bag
2024	NBER Summer Institute (DAE); CESifo Workshop on Big Data in Urban and Regional Economics; LMU Munich Empirical Student Brown Bag
2023	LMU Munich Empirical Student Brown Bag

Other

Languages	German (native), English (fluent), French (basic), Italian (basic), Latin
IT	Microsoft Office, LaTeX, R, Stata, ArcGIS

Completed PhD Coursework

Winter 2023/24	Microeconomics: Consumer and Decision Theory (S. Zhang)
Summer 2024	Microeconomics: Game Theory and Information Economics (M. Lang)
Winter 2024/25	Macroeconomics: Growth (C. Busch)
Summer 2025	Macroeconomics: Business Cycles and Policy (C. Busch)
Winter 2023/24	Econometrics: Regression (A. Proctor)
Summer 2024	Econometrics: Advanced Methods (D. Uysal)
Summer 2025	Economics of Innovation (F. Waldinger)
Winter 2025/26	Empirical Research in Domestic Public Finance (F. Wong)

Robert J. Johannes (LMU Munich)

Does innovative output rise more from working with nearby ideas, or from exposure to distant ideas through cross-disciplinary contact? A leading view in economics treats innovation as a recombination problem: new ideas emerge by combining existing ones (Weitzman, 1998). This perspective implies that the scope for novelty expands when creators draw on more distant domains rather than searching only within a narrow set of closely related ideas. Many landmark breakthroughs appear to fit this logic, with advances often tracing back to the exchange of tools and perspectives across fields. A central empirical challenge is that idea exposure is rarely random: individuals sort into collaborators and institutions in ways that correlate with both talent and research direction. This calls for settings that come close to a laboratory for idea recombination, with plausibly exogenous variation in exposure to nearby versus distant ideas.

I study this question in the context of the French Academy's Rome Fellowship. It co-located elite young artists from multiple disciplines in a shared, tightly structured environment, holding place, resources, and rules fixed. Cohort composition changes mechanically as fellows enter and exit under fixed institutional rules, creating plausibly exogenous year-to-year shifts in a fellow's local idea environment. I digitize the archival record of fellows' required submissions and build an artist-year panel for painting, sculpture, and musical composition that measures both overall output and high-impact production using a harmonized within-discipline high-impact measure. I complement this with measures of prior performance to control for baseline quality.

My preliminary findings suggest sizable cross-disciplinary effects on creative production. I proxy the local idea environment with the high-impact work produced by other co-resident fellows around a given artist in a given year. When this environment is stronger in one year, the artist is more likely to produce high-impact work in the following year, both within and across fields, even after controlling for prior performance. Cross-field exposure is at least as strongly associated with subsequent high-impact output as within-field exposure.

Building on these results, I am now exploiting a unique feature of the Rome Fellowship: it lets me observe impact through multiple lenses and separate short-run approval from long-run importance. The Academy evaluated each required submission in writing, providing a contemporaneous establishment benchmark that can reward rule compliance and technical mastery. Linking these judgments to measures of public reception and to today's canon will let me distinguish high-impact work that was immediately rewarded from high-impact work that was initially dismissed yet later recognized as influential.

The bottleneck is therefore not access to outcomes, but measurement, and this is harder here because the setting spans painting, sculpture, and composition, where output takes different forms and any impact measure has to be comparable across disciplines. I am applying to the NBER Innovation Research Boot Camp because it offers exactly what I currently need for this project to land in the innovation literature: a compact set of frontier approaches to measurement and sustained interaction with the innovation community to calibrate how my multi-lens outcomes map into economists' notions of novelty and influence. My goal is to use the Boot Camp and the Innovation Policy meeting to sharpen the definition and validation of "high-impact" work, stress-test the break between short-run evaluation and long-run influence, and draw clear implications for how institutions and policy can foster breakthrough ideas.

LMU LUDWIG-MAXIMILIANS-UNIVERSITÄT MÜNCHEN

PROF. FABIAN WALDINGER, PHD
UNIVERSITY OF MUNICH



Prof. Fabian Waldinger, PhD

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Germany

Munich, 12 February 2026

To whom it may concern

Reference for Robert Johannes

I strongly support of Robert Johannes' application. I have known him for several years, first through his studies at LMU and then more closely through his work as a research assistant and now as my PhD student. Throughout this time, Robert has been truly exceptional. He combines outstanding analytical ability with unusually broad intellectual range. This breadth is reflected in his training across economics and the humanities, he completed a B.Sc. in Economics, a B.A. in Art History, and an M.Sc. in Economics at the LSE before starting his PhD at LMU. The combination is rare and has real substance in his research: he is interested in how ideas travel across domains, how creative work is evaluated, and why some ideas endure while others fade. Robert's current research project speaks to a central debate in the economics of innovation: whether cross-field mixing is ultimately a distraction or a catalyst for the kind of groundbreaking work that lasts. Robert studies how the way we organize talent across fields shapes creative production and the likelihood of producing work that endures. He exploits a uniquely structured environment (the French Academy's Rome Fellowship) where cross-disciplinary contact is not optional but built into the institution, generating plausibly exogenous variation in exposure to distant ideas. By linking contemporaneous evaluations to modern recognition, he can distinguish delayed-recognition breakthroughs from short-run successes that did not endure.
Beyond this project, Robert has already demonstrated the ability to execute high-quality research independently. His working paper on historical urban development ("From Sticks to Bricks: Construction Technology and Medieval Urban Development") illustrates his strength in combining substantive domain knowledge with rigorous empirical analysis. As a first year graduate student he was invited to present this paper at the DAE NBER Summer Institute.
The NBER Innovation Boot Camp would be a uniquely valuable opportunity for Robert to engage with the frontier literature and to receive feedback from and build relationships with other junior scholars working on related questions. I also believe his intellectual curiosity, maturity, and collaborative style would make him a very valuable member of the group of participants.
I support Robert's application in the highest possible terms.

Sincerely,

Prof. Fabian Waldinger, Ph.D.