Cross-Cutting Activity

Career development
for young researchers

ACTIVITY PLAN

INTRODUCTION

Internationalisation of research has increased transnational collaborations, knowledge exchange, innovation as well as the mobility of the research community. At the same time, the growing internationalisation in R&I significantly broadens the scope of recruitment and the international career development opportunities of researchers and innovators. The mobility of researchers – one of the key principles of the European Research Area (ERA) – is a prerequisite for the advancement of science and technology, leading to a more prosperous and sustainable society in the long run.

Over the last few years, there has been a growing recognition for the need to improve career development conditions to attract and retain the best researchers in Europe. Within this framework, there is a desire to give greater attention to early- and mid-stage researchers' careers, including specific barriers that women, and other underrepresented groups, face in those stages.

In response to this need, COST has launched the Cross-Cutting Activity (CCA) on career development for young researchers. This CCA will be guided by the Council Recommendation on a European Framework to attract and retain research, innovation and entrepreneurial talents in Europe (2023), and the European Charter for Researchers (2023)[1]. For COST to play a role in the implementation of this Framework, we propose the creation of an alliance of young researchers, career advisors, and relevant stakeholders (e.g., higher education institutions and research organisations), contributing to some of the key objectives outlined in the Council Recommendation.

TIMELINE

December 2024 – end of November 2026. The CCA activities timeline is schematized below from January 2025 (M1) to November 2026 (M23).

KEY OBJECTIVES

- Support the full **personal and professional development of young researchers in Europe**;
- Create a '**community of practice**' armed with training and guidance based on examples of good practice provided during CCA (Working Group) meetings and workshops, thereby enabling a more **balanced brain circulation** and improved career development of young researchers[2];
- Analyse the factors which do (or do not) enable **transferability** of these good practices to countries where the development of such activities is still in the early stages;
- Explore how to promote, develop and implement better and more consistent **HR strategies** across Europe, offering **young researchers and innovators** better career opportunities and perspectives.

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[1] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:C_202301640
[2] In this CCA, young researchers are defined as 'First Stage Researchers' (R-1) and 'Recognised Researchers' (R-2), as specified by EURAXESS and adopted by the Council in their Recommendation on a European framework to attract and retain research, innovation and entrepeneurial talents in Europe.

STRUCTURE OF THE NETWORK

The **core CCA network** consists of:

- 2 co-chairs;
- 14 young researchers, quite a few active in running COST Actions;
- 17 career advisors from a variety of COST Countries, bearing in mind the importance of geographical spread.

The co-chairs are two young researchers affiliated to Eurodoc, the European Council of Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers, a grassroots federation of 24 national associations of early career researchers (ECRs) from 22 countries across Europe. The co-chairs are also tasked to provide connection and exchange between the CCA and Eurodoc itself.

Young researchers and **career advisors** make up the core of the CCA. They are the active members, carrying out CCA activities in Working Groups.

The CCA **Wider Network** includes relevant **stakeholders**, who help define the work of the CCA and provide strategic input during general CCA meetings, which will be organised around 2 times a year. During those meetings, stakeholders will have the opportunity to feed into the overall planning of CCA activities. Another role stakeholders can play is to offer CCA Working Groups opportunities to present their ideas to stakeholder organisations, thereby creating immediate impact of their work.

The following stakeholder organisations are represented in the CCA Wider Network:

- European Commission's DG Education and Culture – Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (**MSCA**)
- European Commission's Joint Research Centre (**JRC**)
- European University Association (**EUA**) - Council for Doctoral Education (CDE)
- International Consortium of Research Staff Associations (**ICORSA**)
- Marie Curie Alumni Association (**MCAA**)
- **OECD** Research and Innovation Careers Observatory (**ReICO**)
- Science Europe
- Universities of applied sciences for Europe (**UAS4Europe**)
- Young Academy of Europe (**YAE**)

The COST Association fully supports the CCA network and the implementation of the work carried out by the CCA members.

EXPECTED IMPACT OF THE CCA

1. The CCA will create a **unique network** of young researchers and career advisory and support services staff of universities, research organisations and related entities supporting young researchers;

2. The CCA will produce a set of **recommendations** to policymakers and key stakeholders on how to better support young researchers in their careers, for the reflection of policy makers and career support services at universities and research organizations;

3. The **good practices** shared during training schools and other CCA events will provide a solid basis for the potential **transfer** of these good practices to countries where the development of such activities is still in the early stages.

VISION OF THE CCA CHAIRS

The role of research and innovation is steadily growing as developed countries increasingly engage in fierce competition to develop disruptive technologies and strive to combine technical advancements with societal progress. The ever-growing demand for innovation can only be met by a sizable workforce of research professionals who are well-trained, motivated, integrated into their communities, and equipped with the necessary tools and resources.

However, this increased demand for innovation and innovators stands in stark contrast to the precarious working conditions often offered to early-career researchers, who consistently face career-breaking limitations and hurdles that include poor compensation, limited access to welfare, poor working conditions and career perspectives, and mental health struggles.

European institutions have recognized these challenges and have gradually begun implementing initiatives to create an integrated and supportive ecosystem for research careers, especially at the critical early and mid-career stages. Pivotal milestones in the European Research Area (ERA) include the establishment of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions in 1996, the creation of EURAXESS in 2004, the publication of the European Charter for Researchers in 2005, and the introduction of the Human Resources Strategy for Researchers (HRS4R) in 2008. More recently, the revamped and expanded role of the ERA led to the publication of the European Competence Framework for Researchers[3] in 2022 and, critically, the European Framework for Researchers' Careers[4] in 2023. These achievements have been obtained also with the interaction with stakeholders' organizations that led initiatives such as the SECURE Project[5] and provided dedicated inputs and statements, as in the case of Eurodoc[6], MCAA[7], ICORSA[8], and ISE[9].

Now that a clear direction has been established, every actor in the innovation space needs to work toward an effective and interoperable implementation of a unified research career framework. Resolving current fragmentation will enable the emergence of a truly harmonized and transparent career ecosystem that effectively combines the professional growth of researchers with their well-being and personal development.

Our vision is to create a community in which individuals have access to robust career development resources, mentorship, networking and training opportunities. By fostering a collaborative network among young researchers, career advisors, higher education institutions, and research organizations, we aim to disseminate good practices and consistent HR strategies that standardize and enhance career pathways across Europe.

We envision a European Research Area where mobility is not hindered by bureaucratic burdens but instead drives researchers' professional development and supports a balanced life. This project is dedicated to investigating and disseminating solutions that address the needs of early-career researchers while overcoming current fragmentation through a culture of collaboration. In doing so, we will not only enhance the career prospects of individual researchers but also strengthen Europe's position as a global leader in research and innovation, paving the way toward a more prosperous and sustainable future for all.

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[3] ResearchComp: The European Competence Framework for Researchers: https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/jobs-research/researchcomp-european-competence-framework-researchers_en
[4] Council Recommendation of 18 December 2023 on a European framework to attract and retain research, innovation and entrepreneurial talents in Europe: http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2023/1640/oj
[5] SECURE, Sustainable Careers for Researchers Empowerment: https://secureproject.eu/
[6] Eurodoc statement "Setting high quality employment conditions for early career researchers": https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8105629
[7] MCAA and Eurodoc statement "Declaration on Sustainable Researcher Careers": https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3082245
[8] ICORSA statement "Position Statement on sustainability of research careers and precarity": https://icorsa.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Position-Statement-on-sustainability-of-research-careers-and-precarity_ICoRSA.pdf
[9] ISE statement "A Manifesto for Early Career Researchers": https://initiative-se.eu/2022/09/16/manifesto/

CCA ACTIVITIES AND EVENTS

- **CCA summer meeting 2025:** 3 July 2025, COST premises, Brussels
- **Mid-term CCA conference:** 3-4 December 2025, COST premises, Brussels
- **CCA summer meeting 2026:** *date t.b.c.*
- **Final CCA conference end 2026:** *date t.b.c.*

In addition to the in-person CCA network meetings, all working groups plan **regular online and in-person meetings** to discuss next steps in carrying out WG activities and producing deliverables.

The CCA will develop a **Manifesto or Declaration**, which will be presented as a conclusive outcome of the project. This declaration will serve as a guiding document, outlining a shared vision for enhancing career development opportunities for early-career researchers. It will be informed by good practices collected and evaluated by CCA members. By establishing clear principles, the manifesto will support the creation of more transparent, sustainable, and inclusive career pathways.

WORKING GROUPS

The CCA's activities will be carried out by the following **Working Groups**:

1. WG on **young researchers**;
2. WG on **career advisory and support services**;
3. WG on building a **young researchers community in COST Actions;**
4. WG on **gender equity and fostering diversity in research**.

Given the overlap in topics, regular interaction and cooperation between WGs is strongly encouraged. Mutual learning and sharing of good practices will be key objectives of all WGs.

WORKING GROUP 1: YOUNG RESEARCHERS

Key objectives

- Improve the awareness of young researchers of the existing support structures available to them, including EU career instruments and career development strategies of institutions;
- Explore possibilities to maximise the role of supervisors of the young researchers;
- Improve young researchers' access to the necessary information and trainings.

Planning of activities and deliverables[10]

| Activities | Deliverables | Collaborations | | Timeline |
		with other WGs	with wider network	
Mapping of previous relevant projects on the development of Early Career Researchers	Mapping document on projects on the development of Early Career Researchers	All WGs	EURAXESS	M1 - M6
Mapping the available EU (and other) career instruments and evaluating the awareness and usage of them by the Early Career Researchers	Analysis of the uptake of EU tools for research careers	WG2	EURAXESS, Eurodoc	M4 - M6
Collection of best practice examples on support structures for ECRs from selected stakeholders and their awareness among the intended recipients	Webinar Publication: collection document of best practices	WG2	EURAXESS, MSCA, Eurodoc	M3 - M10
Mapping of research career strategies and skill development opportunities, focusing on career development incentives and obstacles in selected institutions	Publication: collection of best practice examples with recommendations Webinar Guidelines for supervisors Roadmap for ECRs	All WGs	EURAXESS, MSCA, Eurodoc	M3 - M20
Development of a platform design to aggregate tools for research careers	(Design for a) research careers platform	All WGs	EURAXESS, MSCA, Eurodoc, JRC	M3 - M20
Development of policy recommendations for future actions	Policy recommendations	All WGs	EURAXESS, MSCA, JRC, EUA	M18 - M23

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[10] The deliverable schedule may be updated to reflect changes in project requirements or circumstances.

WORKING GROUP 2: CAREER ADVISORY AND SUPPORT SERVICES

Key objectives

- Design, run and analyse a survey based on the EU framework (e.g. The Charter & Code) to identify career advisory and support services currently in place for R1-R2 researchers in the CCA members' institutions / countries;
- Compare support structures to identify good practices, gaps, overlaps or blind spots, and generate a set of recommendations specifically around supporting career development for R1-2 researchers to enhance practice beyond the network;
- Identify formal and informal networks of research career practitioners to explore opportunities for professional networking.

Planning of activities and deliverables[11]

Activities	Deliverables	Collaborations		Timeline
		with other WGs	with wider network	
Mapping of career support practices at institutional and national level	Survey and results: Mapping of research careers services in place for R1 and R2 researchers in the CCA network; Mapping of professional development / networking support in place for research careers professionals.	All WGs - design and distribution	EUA; MCAA EURAXESS ICORSA YAE OECD NCP	M1 - M9
Gap analysis of good practice models	Good practice recommendations for recruiting and supporting career development of R1 and R2 researchers	All WGs - gap analysis inputs	EUA MCAA EURAXESS ICORSA YAE OECD NCP	M9 - M17
Integrated learning and exchange across CCA	Continuous delivery: a wider network member joins each bimonthly meeting		EUA MCAA EURAXESS ICORSA YAE OECD NCP	M1 - M17
Launch of Network for Research Career Professionals	Network for Research Career Professionals		EUA MCAA EURAXESS ICORSA YAE OECD	M17 - M23

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[11] The deliverable schedule may be updated to reflect changes in project requirements or circumstances.

WORKING GROUP 3: BUILDING A YOUNG RESEARCHERS COMMUNITY IN COST ACTIONS

Key objectives

- Establish a transferable structured network for young researchers in COST Actions;

- Organise webinars and events to promote the network;

- Conduct a survey among young researchers in 10-12 COST Actions that have been running for more than one year, with the aim to gather insights on young researchers' needs and expectations in COST Actions;

- Produce a short report integrating survey results and the state of the art to inform the network's structure and activities;

- Develop ideas for additional (networking) activities, e.g. training sessions, information on resources for young researchers, regular newsletters, a dedicated tool for mapping research centers;

- Engage with COST Action Chairs that endorse this initiative.

- Promote the initiative through COST Actions, encouraging participation and sustainability.

Planning of activities and deliverables[12]

Activities	Deliverables	Collaborations		Timeline
		with other WGs	with wider network	
Survey of activities dedicated to young researchers in COST Actions	Survey	WG1, 4		M3 - M5
Data analysis	Report	WG1, 4		M6 - M7
Development of a transferable structured network for young researchers	Network model for young researchers in COST Actions	All WGs		M3 - M9
Development of a dissemination & feedback Webinar for the network structure	Webinar; Feedback from COST Actions	All WGs	All	M9 - M11
Dissemination of the network structure	Dissemination material and/or initiatives	All WGs	All	M11 - M23

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[12] The deliverable schedule may be updated to reflect changes in project requirements or circumstances.

WORKING GROUP 4: GENDER EQUITY AND FOSTERING DIVERSITY IN RESEARCH

Key objectives

Approaching the career growth of early career researchers from the perspective of equity and diversity, as an encompassing term that integrates gender equality with other moves to combat forms of difference-based discrimination, and with a goal to ensure the recognition, respect and value of all members of the research community, and create an equitable environment in science.

- Familiarisation with EU guidelines and tools to promote and maintain gender equity and diversity in research career development and critical assessment of implementation and gaps;

- Analysis of challenges and barriers to early career researchers due to lack of equity and diversity, including information from (a) previously completed or ongoing projects, (b) practice (Wider Network members), and (c) original qualitative data collected through this WG;

- Drafting policy recommendations in relation to equity and diversity in European projects, institutions, and networks based on our findings;

- Overall, promoting and showcasing short and long-term practices and interventions that encourage equity and diversity in the European research community.

Planning of activities and deliverables[13]

| Activities | Deliverables | Collaborations | | Timeline |
		with other WGs	with wider network	
Consolidation of the concepts of gender equity and diversity in the context of research and support to ECR	Report on available resources	WG1	MCAA, ICORSA, Eurodoc	M1 - M6
Analysis of EU tools and documents	Webinar on inclusivity in the European research community		OECD	M1 - M7
Data collection from ongoing or completed projects	Review of the available data	WG2	OECD, Science Europe	M7 - M15
Data collection from initiatives of the wider network	Webinar on collected data	WG2	All	M7 - M15
Interviews and case studies	Position paper or white paper	WG3		M7 - M18
Policy analysis	Policy recommendation	All WGs	JRC	M18 - M23

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[13] The deliverable schedule may be updated to reflect changes in project requirements or circumstances.

ROLE OF THE WIDER NETWORK

To build a strong research and innovation ecosystem, it is essential to foster a well-supported and interconnected community. The wider network of the CCA will play a crucial role in advancing this goal by offering strategic insights to the core network and actively engaging in key cross-cutting issues. These include:

- **Identifying challenges** faced by researchers and **sharing good practices** that enhance career development, ensuring these insights are integrated into the CCA core network.

- Effectively **communicating diverse career pathways**, both within academia and in non-academic sectors, to young researchers and equipping them with the necessary skills to transition successfully.

- Advocating for the **recognition and acknowledgment of doctoral degrees** across different national and sectoral boundaries to ensure seamless career progression.

- Promoting a **holistic approach to strengthening research careers** by expanding access to doctoral training and fostering collaboration among universities, funding bodies, non-academic institutions, and policymakers.

- **Enhancing coordination** and streamlining discussions between different funding mechanisms to optimize support for researchers across Europe.

- Supporting the CCA in **disseminating its upcoming results**.

To ensure meaningful collaboration between the core and wider network, members will actively participate in working groups when relevant topics are discussed. Both core and wider network members are encouraged to take the initiative in launching cooperative efforts, depending on the issues at hand.

ROLE OF THE RAPPORTEUR

The activities carried out by the network will be evaluated by an independent rapporteur, who was appointed by the Director of the COST Association.

The Rapporteur is expected to:

- Attend the general CCA meetings and possibly some working group meetings;
- Attend the CCA mid-term and final conferences;
- Provide feedback to the COST Administration regarding the implementation of the CCA framework;
- Prepare two evaluation reports[14], considering the CCA's progress in achieving its objectives, WG tasks and deliverables outlined in the Activity Plan.

The Rapporteur will have the support of the COST Administration. As inputs she will receive all relevant CCA documents from COST.

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[14] The first evaluation report will be submitted to COST after the mid-term conference; the second evaluation report will be submitted to COST after the final conference.

BUDGET

The CCA network will organize its activities in line with the available budget. The CCA budget will be spent on the network's activities, e.g. general network meetings, WG meetings, conferences and dissemination activities of the network. All activities and related budget spending are subject to approval by the COST Association.

Eligible expenses for the CCA include:

- CCA implementation, including the reimbursement of participants, according to the COST rules;
- Minutes of meetings are the legal basis for expenditures and must be sent to COST;
- All expenditures must be approved by COST before planning activities;
- In-person meetings will generally be held at the COST premises in Brussels, unless there is a specific reason to organize a meeting elsewhere.
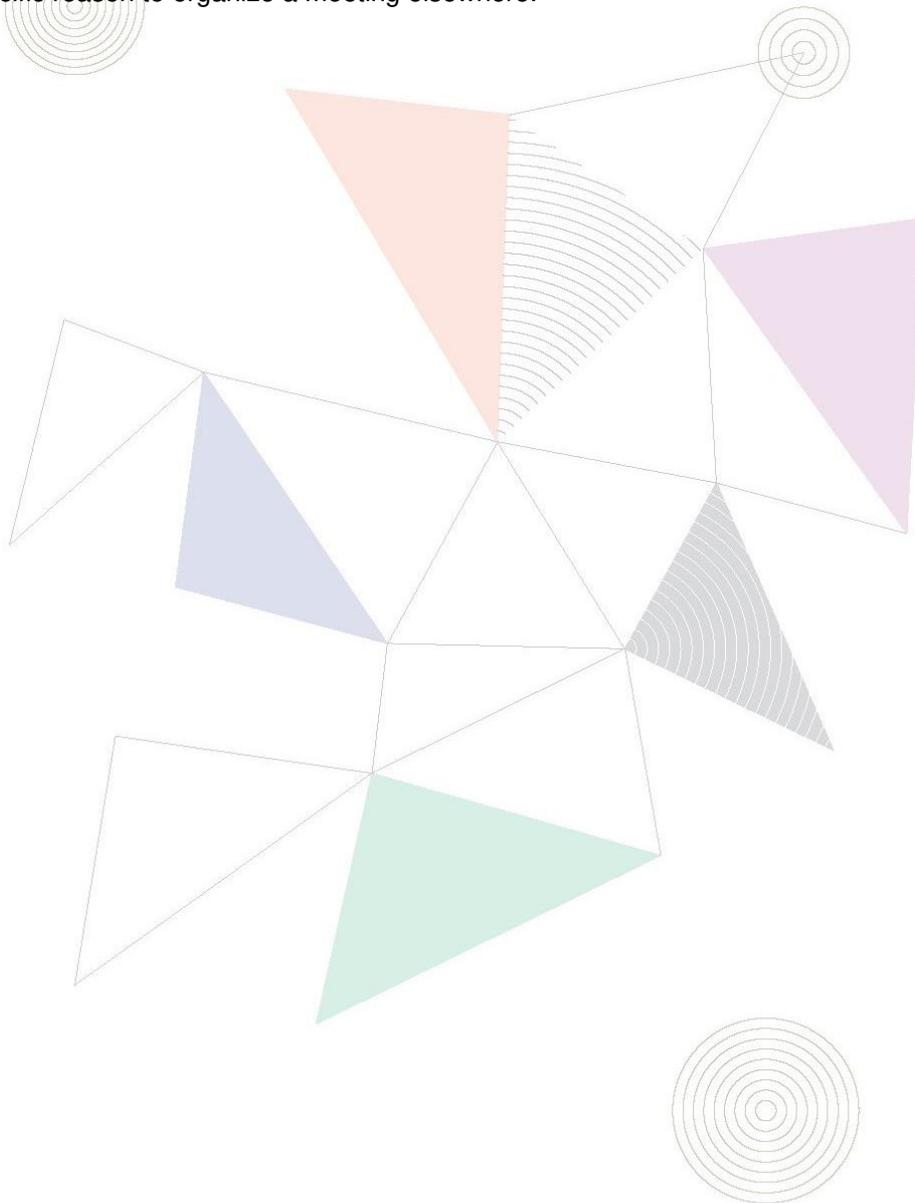
Annex:
List of CCA network members

Core network members

Association Bernard Gregory (ABG), France
Bay Zoltan Nonprofit Ltd. for Applied Research, Hungary
Bilkent University, Turkey
Cardiff Metropolitan University, United Kingdom
CEITEC Masaryk University, Czech Republic
Charles University, Czech Republic
CRM Group, Belgium
École Normale Supérieure Paris, France
École polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL), Switzerland
Eurodoc, European Council of Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers
Ghent University, Belgium
HEFTA Research Institute, Hungary
Helmholtz Munich, Germany
Libera Università Maria Ss. Assunta (LUMSA), Italy
Łukasiewicz Research Network, Poland
Marie Curie Alumni Association (MCAA)
Mersin University, Turkey
Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Norway
Slovak Academic Information Agency (SAIA), Slovakia
Spanish foundation for Science and Technology (FECYT), Spain
University College Dublin, Ireland
University of Donja Gorica, Montenegro
Universität Graz, Austria

University of Helsinki, Finland
University of Jyväskylä, Finland
University of Lausanne, Switzerland
Université du Luxembourg, Luxemburg
University of Navarra, Spain
Universidade NOVA de Lisboa, Portugal
University of Tirana, Albania
Università degli Studi di Torino, Italy
Universität Zürich, Switzerland
Verlab Research Institute, Bosnia and Herzegovina
Vitae, United Kingdom
Yildiz Technical University, Turkey

Wider network members

European Commission's DG Education and Culture – **Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA)** unit
European Commission's Joint Research Centre (**JRC**)
European University Association (**EUA**) Council for Doctoral Education
International Consortium of Research Staff Associations (**ICORSA**)
Marie Curie Alumni Association (**MCAA**)
OECD Research and Innovation Careers Observatory (ReICO)
Science Europe
Universities of applied sciences for Europe **(UAS4Europe)**
Young Academy of Europe **(YAE)**