

Survey-based Report on Early Career Researchers in COST Actions

CCA On career development for young researchers: WG3 on building a young researchers' community in COST Actions

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CONTENTS

- 1. Introduction..... 3
- 2. Structure of the questionnaire and descriptive results 3
- 3. Interpretation and Vision: Toward a Pan-European ECR Community..... 12
- 4. Building a More Inclusive and Connected ECR Ecosystem: Recommendations 13
- 5. Final Reflection and Recommendations..... 14

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1. Introduction

This report presents the findings of a small-scale survey conducted among Young Researchers (YR; also often referred to as Early Career Researchers; R1 and R2 according to the European Framework for Research Careers¹) involved in COST Actions. The survey aimed to assess their motivations, challenges, perceptions of leadership and mentorship, and suggestions for improvement in these areas. This version includes extensive verbatim responses, thematic analysis, and proposals for strengthening a pan-European community of Young Researchers and creating an ad hoc network in single COST Actions.

2. Structure of the questionnaire and descriptive results

The survey was administered via Google Forms and collected 40 responses, with participants recruited by contacting Chairs of COST Actions and young researchers involved in COST Actions and inviting them to distribute or complete the survey within their networks. It combined closed and open-ended questions and targeted YRs engaged in COST Actions across Europe. Responses were analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively to identify key themes and actionable recommendations. In this section, you can find the questions, answers grouped by their frequency and the figures representing the answers.

Q1. What is your current career stage?

The respondents included 13 PhD candidates (32.5%), 9 assistant professors/lecturers (22.5%), 8 postdoctoral researchers (20%), 6 independent researchers (15%; Figure 1). The remaining 4 respondents (10%) identified they fulfil other positions, such as postgraduate student, project manager, or ministry expert.

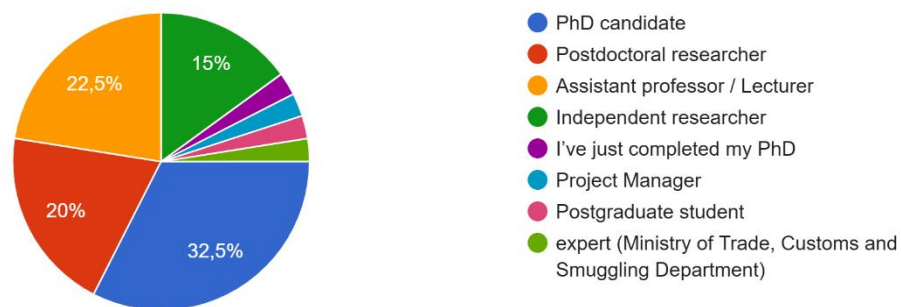


Figure 1. Respondents' answers to question 1 about their current career stage.

Q2. Are you participating or have you participated in a COST Action?

38 out of 40 respondents indicated that they are or they have participated in a COST Action.

¹ https://euraxess.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/policy_library/towards_a_european_framework_for_research_careers_final.pdf

Q3. If yes, in what capacity are you / have you been involved in a COST Action?

The respondents could select multiple answers. The majority of the respondents participated in a COST Action as a Working Group member (38; 95%; Figure 2), 10 respondents were Short-Term Scientific Mission grantees (25%), 9 respondents were Management Committee members (22.5%), 9 respondents were training school attendees (22.5%), and 1 respondent (2.5%) each indicated they: were a local organiser of a COST Action, were a Working Group Leader, and presented at a training school,

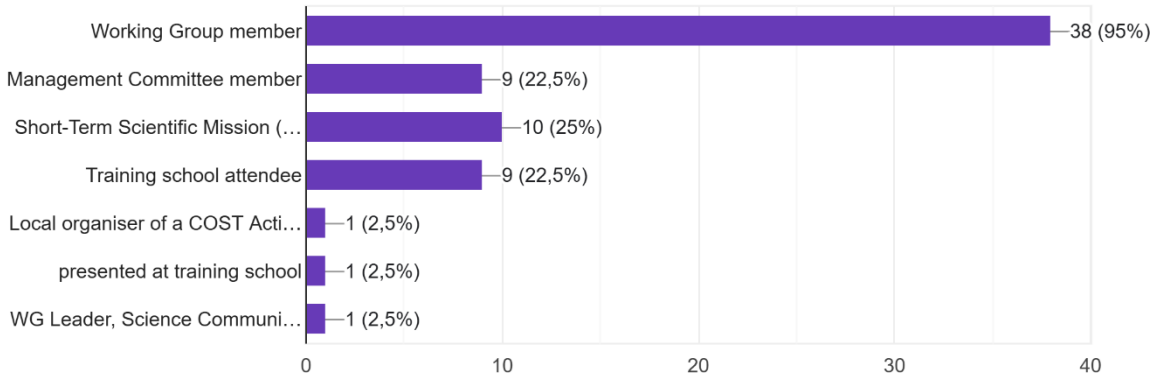


Figure 2. Respondents' answers to question 3 about in which capacity they are or were involved in a COST Action.

Q4. What is your primary motivation for participating in a COST Action?

The respondents could select multiple answers. Expanding one's network was the most frequently chosen motivation for participating in a COST Action (31; 77.5%; Figure 3). 25 (62.5%) and 27 (67.5%) respectively indicated they wanted to collaborate on publications/projects and gain international research experience. 18 respondents wanted to develop new skills (45%) and 12 were motivated by funding opportunities (30%).

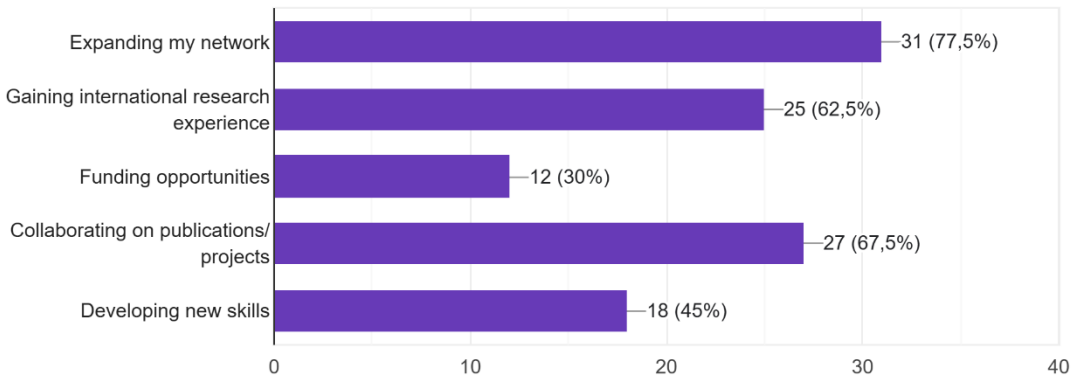


Figure 3. Respondents' answers to question 4 about their primary motivation for participating in a COST Action.

Q5. What are the main challenges you face as an early career researcher in COST Actions?

The respondents could select multiple answers. The respondents identified the limited networking opportunities and administrative and bureaucratic barriers as the main challenges they faced (each 16, 40%), followed closely by the lack of funding (15, 37,5%) and unclear career benefits from participation (14; 35%; Figure 4). In addition, 10 respondents identified difficulty in accessing leadership roles (25%) as one of their main challenges, and 5 respondents answered they had other challenges (12,5%).

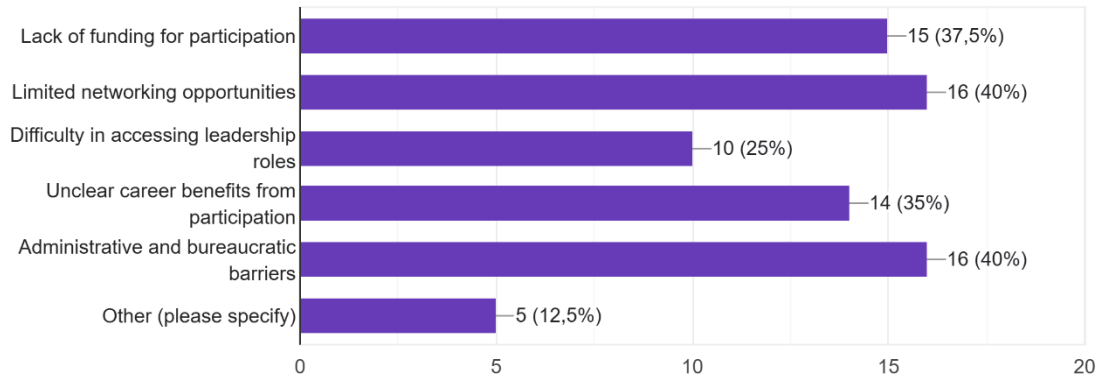


Figure 4. Respondents' answers to question 5 about the main challenges they face in COST Actions.

Q6. In your experience, how accessible are leadership positions in COST Actions for early career researchers?

The largest share of respondents, 42.5% (17 out of 40), indicated that leadership positions are not very accessible, making this the most common view. The second largest group, 35% (14 respondents), considered them somewhat accessible. Only 10% (4 respondents) perceived leadership positions as very accessible, indicating that a relatively small minority experiences clear access to leadership roles within COST Actions. The remaining 12.5% of responses (5 respondents in total) were distributed across several minor categories, each representing 2.5% (1 respondent). These included "not accessible at all," "NA," "I don't know, I haven't tried it," "I have no idea," and "topic not deepened yet."

Q7. What types of support would help you engage more effectively in COST Actions?

A total of 42 free-text responses were collected for the question "What types of support would help you engage more effectively in COST Actions?". These answers were not pre-defined options, but rather open comments written by participants, allowing them to freely describe the types of support they felt were most important and could be more than only one answer. The responses therefore reflect individual experiences and perceptions rather than selections from predefined categories. Overall, several recurring themes emerge from the responses, particularly related to financial support, guidance and training, networking and communication, participation opportunities, and governance or leadership access.

A substantial share of comments referred to financial or material support, mentioned in 8 responses (about 19%). Participants emphasized the importance of travel funding, conference participation support, financial support for research and publications, and full financing for training or courses. Some respondents also highlighted the need for enhanced funding opportunities or less strict deadlines for funding applications, suggesting that financial constraints remain an important barrier to active participation. Another 8 responses (around 19%) focused on the need for clearer guidance, training, and orientation on how COST Actions operate. Several respondents indicated that they would benefit

from introductory sessions for new members, structured guidance on roles and expectations, clearer explanations of procedures and tools, and accessible information about available opportunities such as training schools and Short-Term Scientific Missions (STSMs). Some comments specifically noted that early-career researchers often have limited knowledge of how COST Actions function. Similarly, 8 responses (about 19%) highlighted the importance of networking and communication mechanisms. Participants suggested more in-person meetings, lab exchange opportunities, collaborative environments, and improved communication channels beyond email, such as chat platforms or centralized digital spaces. Some respondents also stressed the value of closer contact between working group leaders and early-career researchers, as well as the importance of responsive and supportive senior colleagues. Another group of responses, 4 comments (around 10%), emphasized the need for greater opportunities for participation in activities and projects. These included requests for more opportunities to contribute to collaborations, participate in research aligned with their interests, and engage in smaller tasks before taking on larger responsibilities. Several responses also referred to STSM-related opportunities, including the need for more time to prepare applications or a reconsideration of acceptance limits. Issues related to leadership and governance access were also raised in 4 responses (about 10%). Participants suggested measures such as guaranteed quotas for early-career researchers in leadership roles, greater accessibility to decision-making bodies, and more democratic processes for applying to Management Committee (MC) roles.

A small number of responses addressed institutional barriers, with 1 response (about 2%) explicitly mentioning lack of support from the respondent's home institution as a limiting factor for engagement. Finally, 9 responses (around 21%) included more specific or unique suggestions that did not easily fit into the broader categories above. These included proposals such as developing collaborative publications involving early-career researchers, improving transparency, clarifying workshop outputs, creating clearer objectives for activities, or providing opportunities for laboratory work through exchanges. A few responses also reflected uncertainty or lack of experience, including answers such as "Not sure," "NA," or comments describing individual difficulties with application processes.

Q8. Do you think that COST Actions provide sufficient mentorship opportunities for early career researchers? Why or why not?

A total of 40 free-text responses were collected for the question "Do you think that COST Actions provide sufficient mentorship opportunities for early career researchers? Why or why not?". As with the previous question, these were open-ended answers rather than predefined options, meaning respondents expressed their views freely. This results in a nuanced picture combining positive perceptions, uncertainty, and critical feedback.

Overall, opinions are mixed but tend to highlight important gaps in structure and accessibility. Approximately 9 respondents (about 22.5%) gave clearly positive answers, stating that mentorship opportunities do exist. However, even within this group, several respondents qualified their answers, noting that mentorship is often informal, dependent on individual initiative, or linked to specific activities such as training schools or mobility (e.g., STSMs). Only a small subset expressed unreservedly positive views, suggesting that while opportunities are present, they are not consistently experienced as sufficient or systematic. A slightly larger group, 11 responses (around 27.5%), provided clearly negative assessments, stating that COST Actions do not provide sufficient mentorship opportunities. The reasons given include lack of structured mentorship programs, limited attention to early-career researchers, preference for senior researchers, weak connections, and insufficient time or commitment from senior colleagues to mentoring activities. Some respondents also emphasized that mentorship is not embedded in the system, but rather left to chance or individual initiative.

The most prominent pattern, however, is a middle-ground perspective, expressed in about 14 responses (35%), where participants acknowledged that mentorship opportunities exist but are not well structured, visible, or consistent. These responses repeatedly highlight that mentorship in COST Actions tends to be informal, uneven across Actions, and highly dependent on specific working groups or individual leaders. Many of these respondents explicitly suggested improvements such as formal mentorship programs, pairing early-career researchers with senior mentors, regular check-ins, and clearer guidelines or standards across Actions. In addition, 6 responses (15%) reflected uncertainty or lack of experience, with participants indicating that they were too new to COST Actions, had not yet participated in relevant activities, or were unaware of existing mentorship opportunities. This itself is an important finding, as it suggests that mentorship opportunities—whether they exist or not—are not always visible or clearly communicated to newcomers.

Across all responses, several recurring themes emerge. First, there is a strong consensus that mentorship is often informal rather than structured, typically occurring through networking, collaboration, or participation in activities rather than through dedicated programs. Second, many respondents pointed to structural limitations, such as lack of time from senior researchers, insufficient funding allocation for early-career engagement, or variability between different COST Actions. Third, there is a clear demand for more formalized and accessible mentorship mechanisms, including mentor–mentee pairing, career development support, and more intentional inclusion of early-career researchers in collaborative work and leadership pathways.

Q9. To what extent has your participation in a COST Action created opportunities for your visibility?

In total, 40 qualitative responses were gathered for this question. Overall, the responses point to a moderately positive but uneven impact on visibility. Approximately 14 respondents (about 35%) reported a clearly positive effect, indicating that their participation in COST Actions has enhanced their visibility in other projects and/or organisations. These participants referred to outcomes such as expanded professional networks, international collaborations, co-authored publications, and involvement in broader initiatives like Horizon Europe proposals. In some cases, respondents described tangible career benefits, including increased recognition in their field or opportunities arising from conferences, training schools, and Short-Term Scientific Missions (STSMs). An additional 10 responses (around 25%) described a moderate or developing impact. These participants noted that COST Actions had somewhat improved their visibility, mainly through networking, presenting research, or establishing initial connections that could lead to future collaborations. However, these responses often included qualifications such as “to a small extent” or “so far,” indicating that the benefits are gradual and dependent on continued engagement, particularly within working groups. At the same time, 9 respondents (about 22.5%) indicated little or no impact on their visibility to date. These responses were often linked to limited participation, lack of opportunities to attend meetings, or relatively passive roles within the Action. Some participants explicitly stated that they had not yet experienced any visibility gains or that their involvement had not translated into connections beyond the COST network. A further 7 responses (around 17.5%) reflected uncertainty or early-stage involvement, with participants explaining that they were too new to evaluate the impact, had not yet engaged in key activities, or were still planning future participation (for example, applying for STSMs).

Q10. Which COST Action opportunities have been most beneficial to you?

The respondents could choose multiple answers. Short-Term Scientific Missions (STSMs) were chosen as the most beneficial COST Action opportunity by the majority of the respondents (24; 60%), followed by training schools (21; 52.5%), interdisciplinary collaboration opportunities (21; 52.5%), networking events (20; 50%), access to new information (15; 37.5%), and leadership roles (9; 22.5%; Figure 5). 1 respondent each (2.5%) indicated dissemination of the findings and the first three options altogether.

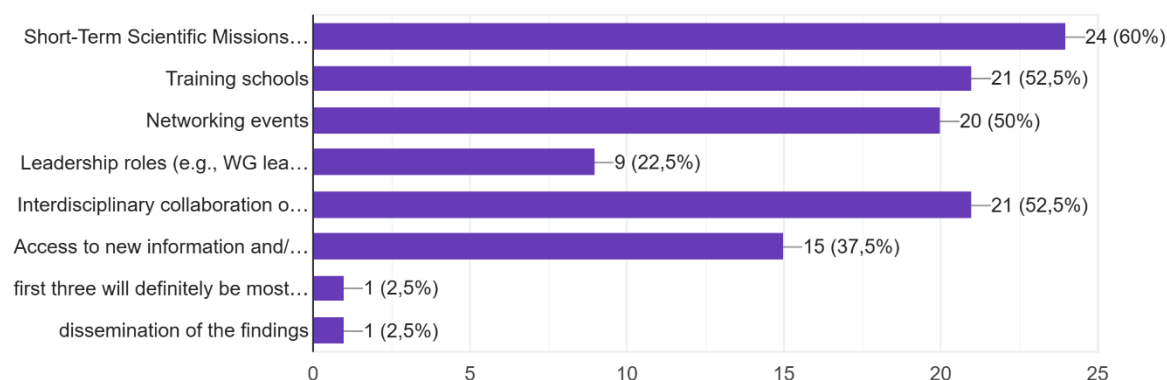


Figure 5. Respondents' answers to question 10 about the most beneficial COST Action opportunities.

Q11. How could COST Actions improve opportunities for early career researchers?

Overall, the responses show a strong convergence around a few key areas, particularly mentorship, funding, networking, visibility, and structural support. The most frequently mentioned theme is the need for more structured mentorship, which appears in approximately 11 responses (about 27.5%). Many participants explicitly suggested formal mentorship programmes, such as pairing early-career researchers with senior academics, introducing “buddy systems,” or ensuring ongoing guidance within working groups. These responses indicate that while informal support may already exist, there is a clear demand for more systematic and accessible mentorship structures.

Closely related to this, 9 responses (around 22.5%) emphasized the importance of increased funding and financial support. Participants highlighted the need for fully funded training courses, conference participation, research stays (e.g., STSMs), and even support for small-scale research activities such as laboratory experiments. Some also suggested allocating specific budgets for ECR-focused activities, indicating that financial constraints remain a key barrier to engagement and development.

Another major theme, appearing in 10 responses (25%), concerns networking and collaboration opportunities. Respondents stressed the value of facilitating connections with experienced researchers, enabling international collaborations, and creating platforms for interaction among peers and senior academics. Suggestions included dedicated networking events, collaborative project preparation meetings, and improved access to research communities and consortia.

In addition, 8 responses (20%) highlighted the need to increase visibility and active participation of early-career researchers. Participants proposed measures such as dedicated speaking opportunities at conferences, highlighting ECR work in meetings or on social media, involving them in publications as lead authors, and allowing them to lead sub-working groups or initiatives. These suggestions reflect a desire not only to participate, but to be recognised and actively involved in shaping research outputs.

A further 7 responses (17.5%) focused on training, guidance, and access to information. Respondents mentioned the need for clearer communication about opportunities, structured onboarding resources, webinars, newsletters, and skill-building workshops (e.g., grant writing, publishing, presenting). This aligns with findings from other questions, reinforcing that clarity and accessibility of information remain critical issues.

Issues related to governance and inclusion in leadership or decision-making were raised in 4 responses (10%). These included suggestions such as increasing access to committee roles, liberalising

leadership positions, and creating formal action plans for ECR inclusion (similar to gender equality plans). This indicates that some participants see structural barriers to full participation at higher levels.

Finally, a smaller number of responses (around 10%) were either uncertain, very general, or did not propose specific improvements, for example stating that COST Actions already provide good opportunities or expressing lack of experience.

Q12. Would you be interested in leadership roles in COST Actions?

Responses to this question show a generally positive attitude toward leadership, but with important reservations related to experience, time constraints, and institutional factors. Approximately 20 respondents (50%) expressed a clear interest in leadership roles, often highlighting benefits such as career development, skill acquisition, networking opportunities, and the possibility to contribute more actively to research directions and collaborations. Several participants explicitly mentioned roles such as Working Group leader or Management Committee (MC) member, indicating awareness of specific leadership pathways within COST Actions. For many, leadership is seen as an opportunity to build competencies in project management and international collaboration, as well as to strengthen their academic profiles.

However, a substantial proportion of respondents—12 responses (30%)—expressed conditional or future interest rather than immediate willingness. These participants typically indicated that they are not yet ready, often due to being in the early stages of their careers (e.g., PhD students or new members), lacking confidence or experience, or wanting first to better understand how COST Actions operate. Many of these responses reflect a progressive perspective, where individuals are open to leadership roles later in their careers, once they feel more established or integrated into the network.

At the same time, 6 respondents (15%) expressed a clear lack of interest in leadership roles. The reasons given include high workload, competing priorities (such as PhD completion or research responsibilities), perceived bureaucracy, and limited institutional recognition of such roles. Notably, one response pointed out that leadership involvement is not always valued by home institutions, which can reduce motivation to take on additional responsibilities. A small number of responses—2 (5%)—were ambivalent or mixed, indicating uncertainty or context-dependent interest (e.g., depending on time availability or suitability for early-career researchers).

Across all responses, several key themes emerge. First, leadership roles are widely perceived as valuable for professional growth, particularly in terms of networking, visibility, and skill development. Second, there is a clear sense that timing matters, with many early-career researchers preferring to delay leadership involvement until they gain more experience. Third, structural barriers, such as time constraints, lack of confidence, and insufficient institutional recognition, play an important role in limiting immediate engagement.

Q13. COST Actions contribute to career development for young researchers (scale: 1–5)

The mean score of 2.7 indicates that while the framework has potential, many young researchers do not yet perceive significant impact on career progression, especially in the absence of visibility, funding, and recognition mechanisms (see Figure 6).

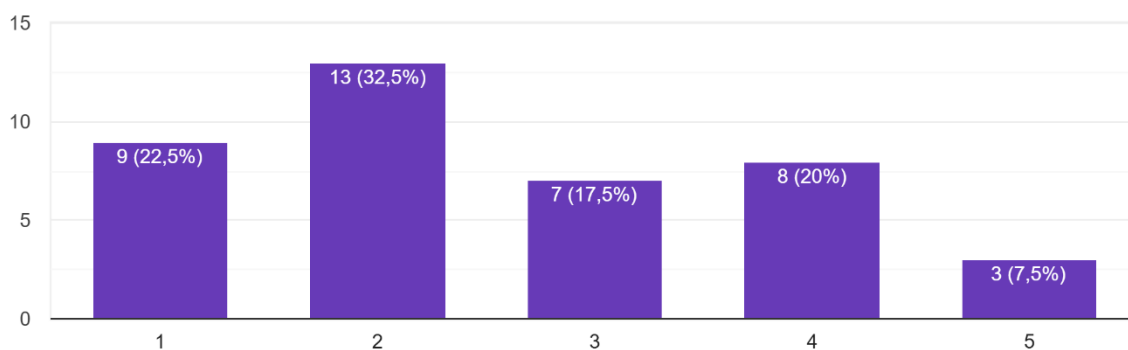


Figure 6. The distribution of respondents' answers on question 13 about COST Actions' contribution to career development for early career researchers.

Q14. Please share an example of how your participation in a COST Action has benefited your career.

The responses reveal a strongly positive overall perception, although the degree of impact varies depending on level of participation and time spent in the network. The most prominent theme across the responses is the importance of networking and collaboration, mentioned in approximately 18 responses (about 45%). Many participants highlighted how COST Actions enabled them to connect with researchers from other countries, establish collaborations, and become part of international and multidisciplinary research communities. In several cases, these connections led to joint publications, participation in research proposals (including Horizon Europe), or identification of partners for future projects, demonstrating the tangible career value of these networks.

Closely linked to this, 10 responses (25%) emphasized the role of Short-Term Scientific Missions (STSMs), training schools, and mobility opportunities. These experiences were often described as transformative, allowing participants to learn new techniques, gain hands-on experience, and collaborate directly with external research groups. In some cases, respondents reported that skills acquired through COST activities—such as adopting new methodologies (e.g., CRISPR/Cas9)—directly contributed to securing funding or launching new research projects in their home institutions. Another 9 responses (around 22.5%) highlighted visibility and academic recognition as key benefits. Participants mentioned opportunities to present their work, deliver talks (including keynote presentations), contribute to publications, and gain recognition within their research communities. These activities were seen as important for building academic reputation and advancing career prospects. In addition, 8 responses (20%) referred to skills development, including both technical skills and transferable skills such as scientific communication, confidence in international environments, and interdisciplinary thinking. Several respondents noted that COST Actions helped them broaden their research perspectives and expand their areas of expertise.

A smaller group, 5 responses (12.5%), described the benefits as potential rather than already realised, particularly among participants who had recently joined or had not yet fully engaged in activities. These respondents often expressed optimism about future opportunities, especially in terms of networking, collaboration, and visibility. At the same time, 2 responses (5%) reported limited or negative experiences, for example due to perceived lack of fairness in selection processes or limited access to activities such as STSMs or training schools. While these are a minority, they highlight that access to opportunities is not always perceived as equitable.

Q15. What additional initiatives or changes would make COST Actions more beneficial for young researchers?

The responses show a high degree of consistency, with several key priorities repeatedly emerging, particularly around funding, mentorship, networking, communication, and structural inclusion. The most frequently mentioned area for improvement is increased financial support, highlighted in approximately 13 responses (about 32.5%). Participants called for more funding for research stays (e.g., STSMs), conference participation, training schools, and even small-scale research or “mini-projects” led by early-career researchers. Some responses also pointed to inequities in funding allocation, suggesting that more resources should be directed toward actively engaged early-career researchers rather than more senior or less involved participants. Concerns about insufficient daily allowances and reimbursement processes were also raised, indicating practical financial barriers.

Closely following this, 11 responses (27.5%) emphasized the need for structured mentorship programmes. Many respondents proposed formal mentor–mentee schemes, better integration of early-career researchers with experienced participants, and dedicated support for career development. This includes not only scientific guidance but also career-oriented initiatives, such as webinars on post-PhD pathways or proposal writing. The recurring nature of this theme reinforces the perception that mentorship is currently too informal and should be more systematically embedded. Another key theme, present in 10 responses (25%), relates to networking and collaboration opportunities. Participants suggested more meetings (especially face-to-face), collaborative research projects, cross-COST Action initiatives, and dedicated spaces (both physical and virtual) for interaction. Several responses also emphasized the importance of creating opportunities specifically tailored to early-career researchers, such as dedicated sessions within meetings or events designed for their engagement.

In addition, 8 responses (20%) highlighted the importance of clearer communication and access to information. Respondents noted that opportunities within COST Actions are not always well communicated or easily accessible, particularly for newcomers. Suggestions included structured onboarding sessions, clearer guidance on participation, centralized information resources, and improved dissemination of opportunities. A further 7 responses (17.5%) focused on training and skill development, including more training schools, workshops, webinars, and support for developing both research and transferable skills (e.g., proposal writing, communication). Some participants also highlighted the need for language support, particularly for those less confident in English in academic settings.

Issues related to inclusion, visibility, and leadership opportunities for early-career researchers were mentioned in 6 responses (15%). These included suggestions such as dedicated quotas for early-career researchers in funding schemes, leadership roles, or meeting participation, as well as the creation of ECR coordinators within each COST Action. Respondents also stressed the importance of ensuring that early-career researchers are actively involved and visible within activities and decision-making processes. Finally, a small number of responses (around 10%) were either uncertain, non-specific, or indicated lack of experience, such as “Not sure” or “NA,” which again reflects varying levels of engagement among participants.

Q16. Would you recommend COST Actions to other early career researchers?

The results show a very strong overall endorsement of COST Actions, with only a small number of neutral or negative responses. The vast majority of respondents, 34 out of 40 (85%), expressed a clear willingness to recommend COST Actions to other early-career researchers. Within this group, participants consistently highlighted several key benefits. The most frequently mentioned was networking, which appears as the central reason for recommendation. Respondents emphasized the value of connecting with international researchers, building collaborations, and engaging with diverse

academic communities. Many described COST Actions as a unique platform for exchanging ideas and developing partnerships across countries and disciplines.

In addition to networking, many responses pointed to career development opportunities, including skill development, increased visibility, participation in projects and publications, and access to international events such as conferences, training schools, and Short-Term Scientific Missions (STSMs). Several respondents explicitly noted that COST Actions are particularly valuable for researchers with limited funding, as they provide access to opportunities that might otherwise be difficult to obtain. Others highlighted the importance of knowledge exchange and interdisciplinary collaboration, describing COST Actions as a supportive and stimulating research environment. A smaller group of 4 respondents (10%) expressed uncertainty or conditional recommendations. These participants either indicated that they were too new to fully evaluate their experience or suggested that COST Actions are beneficial “if used correctly” or could improve in certain areas. Their responses suggest that while the potential is recognized, the actual experience may depend on level of engagement or specific circumstances within each Action. Only 2 responses (5%) were clearly negative, with one respondent stating they would not recommend COST Actions due to perceived lack of support for early-career researchers or participants from Inclusiveness Target Countries (ITC).

3. Interpretation and Vision: Toward a Pan-European ECR Community

The survey responses reflect both the promise and the persistent limitations experienced by young researchers within COST Actions. While participants broadly appreciate the networking and visibility potential, many express frustrations over systemic gaps particularly in mentorship, funding equity, and access to leadership positions. These findings underscore the importance of rethinking how COST can serve as a more effective platform for nurturing the next generation of European scholars.

Key Themes and Interpretations:

1. Mentorship: A Missed Opportunity with Transformative Potential

Mentorship emerged as a highly valued but inconsistently delivered component of the COST experience. Many respondents pointed to the absence of formal structures, standard guidelines, or sustained support throughout the duration of the Action.

“There are no established standards or well-defined guidelines to ensure adequate mentorship.”

“It would benefit from having a structured mentorship program, like in Horizon projects.”

The absence of structured mentorship represents a missed opportunity to foster professional development. By institutionalizing diverse mentoring models such as peer mentoring, reverse mentoring, and intergenerational exchange COST Actions could become long-term accelerators for career growth and collaboration.

2. Leadership Access and Institutional Recognition

Although many young researchers are willing to take on leadership roles, structural and institutional obstacles often deter participation. Respondents cited bureaucracy, lack of clear pathways, and minimal recognition from their home institutions as significant deterrents.

“I would be interested, but my institution doesn’t value this involvement.”

“There’s a lot of bureaucracy and little reward.”

To make YR leadership meaningful and sustainable, COST should both streamline access and actively promote institutional recognition. Issuing formal certificates of leadership and negotiating acknowledgment frameworks with universities could enhance the perceived value of these roles.

3. Motivations vs. Structural Barriers

The motivations that drive YR international collaboration, skill development, and visibility are frequently undermined by financial constraints and opaque processes.

“Lack of funding makes it difficult to attend key events.”

“Participation benefits are unclear if you don’t get travel grants.”

The current gap between ambition and access risks marginalizing many young researchers, particularly those from under-resourced regions or institutions. Dedicated budget lines, transparent selection processes, and flexible participation formats could help bridge this divide and ensure equitable access to COST resources.

4. Building a More Inclusive and Connected ECR Ecosystem: Recommendations

To fulfil its potential as a springboard for early-career academic development, COST could move beyond incidental inclusion and toward intentional empowerment. The following strategic recommendations are informed by both the survey findings and broader best practices in research capacity-building:

1. Create structured young researcher platforms within Actions with the aim to:

- Encourage the creation of YR-specific forums or working groups within each Action;
- Appoint rotating YR focal points to enhance communication, mentorship, and peer-to-peer engagement;
- Introduce dedicated digital platforms (e.g., Slack, MS Teams, COST-hosted communities) to support transnational collaboration across Actions.

2. Establish a pan-European COST young researchers’ Network which focuses on:

- Organise annual symposia, joint training schools, and YR-led interdisciplinary exchanges hosted in rotating member countries;
- Foster cross-Action, YR-led research clusters on emerging societal and scientific themes.

3. Promote certification and institutional advocacy, for example:

- Provide digital badges and formal certificates recognizing YR contributions to COST leadership and coordination;
- Collaborate with university administrations and national COST coordinators to integrate COST leadership into career evaluation and academic CV standards.

4. Strive towards equitable funding and participation models by introducing:
 - Flexible funding mechanisms to support researchers with limited institutional support;
 - Pilot seed grants for YR-led micro-projects, enabling meaningful contributions beyond event participation;
 - Minimum YR representation in decision-making bodies.
5. Enhance storytelling and visibility by, for example:
 - Creating a dedicated section in COST newsletters and social media to feature young researchers' voices and success stories and ask all COST Actions to do so. There are already some good practices, e.g. theWEMov and Hidden COST Actions;
 - Developing an annual publication or video series showcasing how COST participation has shaped young researchers' trajectories;
 - Using these narratives to advocate for COST's impact within broader European research policy.

5. Final Reflection and Recommendations

This survey reveals more than gaps; it uncovers aspirations. Young researchers are not passive recipients of opportunity — they are agents of innovation, community-building, and cross-border knowledge exchange. COST has already laid a foundation. With strategic coordination, stronger institutional partnerships, and a commitment to equity, it can become a transformative engine of opportunity for the next generation of European researchers. WG3 will make use of the results of this small-scale survey to help shape the young researchers' network for COST Actions. In doing so, the WG makes the following recommendations to COST Actions that wish to integrate a young researchers' network:

- Define activities for the YR network;
- Establish structured mentorship programs with defined goals and roles;
- Institutionalize young researchers' forums and learning spaces within each Action;
- Offer formal recognition for young researchers' leadership and contributions;
- Allocate protected funding for young researchers-led activities and face-to-face participation;
- Promote annual young researchers' assemblies and cross-Action initiatives under a COST-wide network for young researchers;
- Use the young researchers' network template available to all COST Actions.

Young Researchers' network

The Young Researchers' Network is a dynamic global community designed to foster collaboration among international young researchers. By leveraging external partnerships and resources, the network actively promotes the exchange of scientific knowledge, collaboration in projects and other joint research initiatives. The network's mission is to address real-world challenges through innovative, cross-

disciplinary solutions, empowering young researchers across Europe to make a meaningful impact on society. The structure of the suggested network can be found in Figure 7.

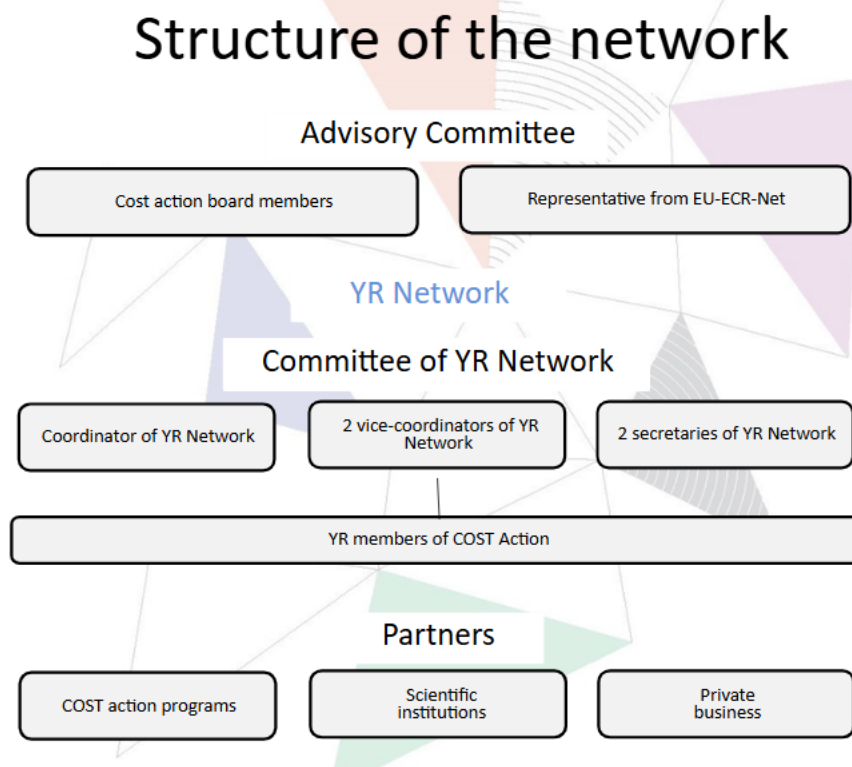


Figure 7. The structure of the suggested Young Researchers' Network

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