

Recommendations for Horizon Europe: Reframing ECRs in Marine Science

Within Horizon Europe collaborative research and innovation projects, the training and professional development of early career researchers (ECRs) is increasingly framed as an integral component, with capacity building embedded in dedicated work packages and ECRs identified as a priority target group. The Commission has reinforced this project-level focus with structural investment aimed at improving their working conditions and career prospects in line with the European Charter for Researchers.

Yet, the extent to which these commitments translate into meaningful integration of ECRs in the day-to-day life of Horizon Europe projects remains uneven.

This brief supports principal investigators, institutions, grant assessors, the European Commission, and those included in the process of engaging Early Career Researchers (ECRs) within Horizon Europe (HE) projects. Success stories are shared alongside practical recommendations for implementation are proposed.

ECR Engagement in HE projects:

ECRs can contribute dynamic and contemporary perspectives to HE projects; conceptual flexibility, proximity to scientific literature, innovation in methods and tools, science communication, interdisciplinary flexibility, strong professional drive, and the contribution of generational perspectives that complement the experience of more senior colleagues.

Yet, limited networks, low visibility of non-academic pathways, and precarious short-term contracts can restrict their participation. Particularly when contracts end before publications, reporting or exploitation activities are completed. Coordinated support is therefore needed to strengthen ECR contributions and develop future Horizon Europe leaders.

Success Stories:

- HE projects can develop and **expand ECR's scientific scope beyond their research and institution**.
- HE projects encourage ECRs to **think outside their specific research fields**.
- HE projects can provide a **collaborative and welcoming space for ECRs**.
- ECRs noted exposure to wide-ranging stakeholders, **engaging within the science-policy interface**.
- **Independent networks for ECRs** support access to networking, and collaborative opportunities.

Project	Success Example	Value Added
	Time at the consortium meetings was dedicated to ECRs in the project.	The ECR day was received as enriching, and supportive for those who attended.
	Consortium emails made ECRs aware of activities and publication opportunities.	Opportunities for career development were enabled for ECRs.
	Multi-project HE ECR network hosted regular meetings and joint activities.	Events included webinars on grant writing, funding, and collaborative publications.
	Cross-project AZTI summer school 2024 included ECRs from multiple HE projects.	Summer schools were enriching events, helping ECRs build networks, skills, and confidence
	ECRs were able to lead/co-lead several tasks and related activities.	Experience in deliverables and publications, involving multiple partners, alongside leading.

Recommendations in Support of ECRs:

Tailored Capacity Building and Training



- Projects and institutions, in collaboration with ECRs, should identify training priorities and define shared goals from the outset of a project.
- Cross-project networks are vital to coordinate training across consortia, reducing per-project cost, enabling resource sharing and broadening reach of project outputs.
- Funders should explicitly recognise such cross-project coordination as an eligible activity, as transferable skills are often as important as technical research skills.

Evaluating ECR Engagement in Grant Proposals

- Incorporate qualitative indicators and collaborative outputs, such as attendance numbers, interactive sessions organised, ECR-led publications, media outputs, and deliverables.
- Provide supplementary guidance on evaluating proposal dissemination and exploitation, which should include meaningful ECR engagement.
- Capacity building in projects should allocate resources for trainers and trainees (person months), and dedicated time for facilitating ECR activities through project management.
- The meaningful contributions of ECRs and their longevity, for the duration of the project and beyond, should be considered in both the proposal and proposal evaluations.

Enhancing Community Visibility and Mentorship

- Ensure ECRs have the conditions to access and use existing communication platforms and networks.
- Dedicated ECR sessions at project meetings and events to facilitate peer networking and direct interaction with senior scientists.
- Reserve funding in proposals for cross-project ECR engagement (e.g. funding and time to attend sister project meetings, and collaborate on cross-project deliverables).
- Include formal project mentorship initiatives, incentives, and recognition in proposals, for ECRs to develop professional capacity with international and interdisciplinary senior researchers.

Providing Career Support for ECRs

- Assign ECRs as leads/co-leads of tasks to encourage project management skills growth for career progression in a research environment, while ensuring clear guidance and mentorship.
- Adopt mobility mechanisms such as secondments, placements, and cross-institutional advisors.
- Ensure support is equitable and accessible to all ECRs, independent of contract type, geography, or other (personal) circumstances.
- Implement transparent and well-communicated publication processes to enable fair opportunities.

Policy Recommendations:

- European Research Area Policy Agenda 2025-2027 & Regulation (EU)2025/3593: Provide grant assessors and proposers guidance to evaluate meaningful inclusion of ECRs in proposals.
- Horizon Europe Horizon & EURATOM General Model Grant Agreement: Streamline institutional fund reallocation mechanisms in HE projects to enable contractual longevity for ECR researchers.

Take Home Messages:

- Reframe ECRs as **a valuable source of expertise and skills**, not solely a junior contribution.
- **Collaborative ECR networks** provide essential peer-to-peer support and professional opportunities.
- Include and assess the quantity and quality of **ECR capacity building in project grant proposals**.
- Continuous support for ECRs throughout the entire project lifespans can **strengthen researcher independence** and upskill the next generation of HE grant applicants.



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