

COST – a Programme to Support Excellence and Inclusiveness

1. Introduction

The COST programme funds projects which enable cooperation among scientists and researchers across Europe. COST is 'bottom-up' and funds projects in all research areas.

Scientists and researchers can participate in science and technology networks known as COST Actions through either being part of a new proposal (see Section 6) or joining an existing COST Action (see Section 7). COST Actions are basically networking instruments for scientists and researchers to co-operate and co-ordinate nationally-funded research activities. COST, however, does not fund research itself.

2. The Strategic Importance of COST for EU13

COST is of particularly value for researchers from academia and business from the EU-13 (Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia) because of three main characteristics of COST:

- 1) Programmatic rationale: COST contributes actively to the '*Spreading Excellence and Widening Participation*' goal of HORIZON 2020 with a strong focus on the so called COST Inclusiveness Target Countries (ITC). The ITC include all EU-13 countries mentioned above.
- 2) Budget rationale: Budgets are often regarded as the evidence of how important a political or programmatic proclamation really is. In this case, the importance for EU-13 is justified by the mere fact that half of COST's total budget should be of direct benefit to the ITC. Given the low overall number of researchers in these countries compared to the other COST member states, this requires a huge effort to be more beneficial to researchers from ITC countries in order to reach this budget target.
- 3) Affirmative selection: Only – and really only – for proposals for COST Actions which are ranked in between those projects which will be for sure funded and those projects which will for sure not be funded, i.e. the so called grey zone where not enough money is available to fund all projects ranked with the same marking by the external independent reviewers, the Scientific Committee usually favours proposals with a high share of partners, especially in leading positions, from ITC, among other considerations.

3. The COST Programme in a Nutshell¹

Founded in 1971, COST – European Cooperation in Science and Technology – is the first and widest European framework for the transnational coordination of nationally funded research activities. It is based on an inter-governmental agreement and comprises currently 35 European Member Countries plus one Cooperating State. This allows researchers from these countries to embark upon networking opportunities by participating in science and technology networks called 'COST Actions'.

Legally COST has been re-established as an association in 2013. COST is governed by its Member States via their representatives in the COST Committee of Senior Officials (CSO) - the General Assembly of the COST Association.

COST's *mission* is to strengthen Europe's scientific and technical research capacity by supporting cooperation and interaction between European researchers, covering from basic to applied or technological research and including research addressing issues of pre-normative nature or of particular societal importance.

According to the COST Mission Statement,² COST key features are:

- building capacity by connecting high-quality scientific communities throughout Europe and worldwide;
- providing networking opportunities for early career investigators;
- increasing the impact of research on policy makers, regulatory bodies and national decision makers as well as the private sector.

4. COST Countries

The 36 COST Member Countries are: Austria, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Montenegro, The Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, United Kingdom and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

Israel is a Cooperating State. A Cooperating State implies non-voting rights in the COST Committee of Senior Officials (CSO) However, researchers from COST's Cooperating State enjoy member rights in COST Action participation.

¹ Text primarily based on COST (2014): COST European Cooperation in Science and Technology 2014-2015. About COST. How to join a COST Action; http://www.cost.eu/download/About_COST_2014_2015.

² COST Mission Statement, COST 4152/11, Brussels, 23 May 2011, approved by the COST Committee of Senior Officials (CSO) at its 182nd meeting on 17 - 18 May 2011.

5. Funding for COST Actions and modes of operation

The funds provided by COST support the coordination costs of the pan-European research networks (COST Actions). In this way, COST has leveraged during the last seven years approximately EUR 5 billion of research funding and reaches out to over 30,000 researchers across Europe. COST is funded from of the European R TD Framework Programmes budget (currently HORIZON 2020).

Through its COST Actions, COST does not fund research itself, but provides support for networking activities. COST Actions are **bottom-up science and technology networks open to researchers and stakeholders**, with four-year duration and a minimum participation of five COST Countries .

COST Actions operate through a range of networking tools, such as **meetings, workshops, conferences, training schools, short-term scientific missions (STSMs) and dissemination activities**.

COST Actions are open to researchers from **universities, public and private research institutions, as well as to NGOs, industry and SMEs**. More information on participating in COST Actions can be accessed through the following link: <http://www.cost.eu/participate>

For each grant period within a COST Action, the COST Action's Management Committee (MC) is required to plan, define and approve, in the guise of a work and budget plan, the Action's scientific activities. Each Action has a designated budget which signifies the maximum financial contribution that will be provided by the COST Association for the given grant period. A COST grant funds scientific activities under the following budget lines:³

1. Meetings
2. Training Schools
3. Short Term Scientific Missions (STSM)
4. Dissemination activities and Publications
5. Other Expenses Related to Scientific Activities

Budget lines 1-5 come under the collective heading: 'science expenditure'. The MC can rearrange the budget allocation for approved activities listed under 'science expenditure'.

6. Financial Scientific and Administrative Coordination tasks, which is is a fixed percentage contribution afforded to support Grant Holder's in administering and coordinating the approved scientific activities.

The eligible travel and meeting expenses include

- Accommodation
- Meals
- Long distance (cross-border) travel expenses
- Local transport
- Other travel expenses (such as visa expenses)

³ COST Vademecum, Version 2.0, 13.1.2016; <http://www.cost.eu/download/COSTVademecum>

In addition, COST supports also participation of trainers and trainees to training schools foreseen under COST Actions as well as short-term scientific missions (STMS). STMS are exchange visits aimed at supporting individual mobility, strengthening existing networks and fostering collaboration between researchers. A STSM should specifically contribute to the scientific objectives of the COST Action, whilst at the same time allowing those partaking in the missions to learn new techniques, gain access to specific data, instruments and / or methods not available in their own institutions / organisations.

COST also supports the costs of local organisers, a contribution to the overall expenses related to organising approved meetings (excluding dissemination meetings), conferences, workshops and / or training schools.

There are several eligible and non-eligible expenses associated with meetings, training schools and STMS. Please check the COST Vademecum!⁴

Finally, COST provides financial support for the production of dissemination material

6. Establish a new COST Action and Evaluation Procedure

COST invites researchers throughout Europe to submit proposals for COST Actions through a continuous Open Call. COST proposals have to be submitted via the e-COST online submission tool. **The next collection date is tentatively set for 1 December 2016, at 12:00 CET.**

The collection dates are regularly updated under this link: http://www.cost.eu/participate/open_call

The proposals are evaluated in a 3-step procedure. First, they are evaluated under a double-blind peer review process by independent external peers, who have the technical competence. Besides of checking the eligibility criteria (length, anonymity, peaceful purpose and language [= English]), they evaluate along 3 main evaluation criteria:

- 1) S&T Excellence (i.e. soundness of the challenge; progress beyond the state- of-the-art and innovation potential; added value of networking)
- 2) Impact (i.e. scientific, technological and/or socio-economic impact; measures to maximise impact; level of risk and level of potential innovation/breakthroughs)
- 3) Implementation (i.e. coherence and effectiveness of the work plan; appropriateness of management structures and procedures; network as a whole)

13 questions have been formulated under these 3 main criteria to structure the evaluation process.⁵

In a second step, each proposal is again discussed by an ad hoc Review Panel. Four to six ad hoc Review Panels are set up after each collection date, based on the number of received proposals and on the topics covered.

⁴ COST Vademecum, Version 2.0, 13.1.2016; <http://www.cost.eu/download/COSTVademecum>

⁵ See for more information the COST Open Call Submission, Evaluation, Selection and Approval (SESA) Guidelines, OC-2016-2 – 25-04-2016; <http://www.cost.eu/module/download/48815>

Also step 2 uses double-blind peer review, which means that the identity of both Review Panel members and proposers is kept confidential.

The ad hoc Review Panels are in charge of:

- a) Reviewing and validating all the Consensus Reports and marks submitted in Step 1
- b) Resolving the differences in opinions among the independent External Experts
- c) Ranking the proposals above the overall threshold and preparing the shortlist of proposals
- d) Identifying those proposals, among those above the overall threshold, which address emerging issues or potentially important future developments
- e) Preparing the report for the COST Scientific Committee, reflecting the process and the decisions of Step 2.

Step 3 of the evaluation involves the Scientific Committee (SC) of COST. The SC aims to guarantee that the rules and procedures are observed throughout the process. Specifically, it is in charge of:

- Validating the list of names and expertise of the independent external experts assigned to each proposal;
- Validating the ad hoc Review Panels at each collection date (number of Review Panels and composition);
- Identifying among the proposals with the same mark in the so called 'grey zone'(see Section 2), those that best respond to COST mission and policies, on the basis of the aggregated data on the network of proposers (breakdown, expertise, geographic, age and gender distribution), and of plans to involve relevant participants or stakeholders in the proposal.
- Ensuring a balanced COST Action portfolio by ensuring the coverage of all S&T fields;
- Establishing the final ranking of proposals recommended for funding to be presented to the COST Committee of Senior Officials (CSO) for Approval

The SC only selects among those proposals with the same mark in the so called 'grey zone'(see Section 2), which are positioned between those proposals with higher marks for which funding is assured and those proposals with lower marks for which no funding is available. Certainly, issues such as the overall proportion and number of proposers from Inclusiveness Target Countries (ITC) are appreciated.

Following this thorough evaluation and selection process, the decision for funding a proposal is taken by the COST Committee of Senior Officials (CSO) within eight months from the collection date. Successful proposals are approved to become COST Actions and can expect to 'kick-off' within three months thereafter.

7. Join an existing COST Action

One of the most unique features of COST is that existing COST actions can also be joined by researchers. The following procedure is foreseen for this:

For institutions from the 36 COST Member Countries and one Cooperating State:

a) If your country has not yet accepted the COST Action's Memorandum of Understanding:

- Contact your Country National Coordinators (CNC) who can launch your country's participation procedure in the relevant Action (only possible if national funding for the Actions' activity is available). Once done, the CNC can officially nominate you as a representative of your country to the Management Committee (MC). The MC is formed by national experts of the signatory countries and is in charge of implementing, supervising and coordinating the activities of the Action.
- it is also recommended that you inform the Chair of the Action of your interest.

b) If your country has already accepted the Action's Memorandum of Understanding,

- but has not yet nominated 2 representatives:

- Contact your COST National Coordinator (CNC) who can officially nominate you as a representative of your country to the Management Committee (MC).
- It is also recommended that you inform the Chair of the Action of your interest.

- and has already nominated 2 representatives to the MC:

- Contact the Action Chair for possible nomination by the Management Committee (MC) to a Working Group (WG) of the COST Action you are interested to join.

For an overview of the Country National Coordinators (CNC), Action participation and Action Chairs for each COST Member Country an online search tool has been developed, which can be accessed under the following link: http://www.cost.eu/about_cost/cost_countries

When the period of 12 months has elapsed from the date the CSO approved an Action, the participation of additional COST Countries beyond this period is subject to formal approval of the MC of the Action.

Also researchers from non-COST Member Countries (or cooperating states) can join existing COST Actions. For them different procedures apply which can be accessed here: http://www.cost.eu/participate/join_action

COST especially encourages researchers from so called **Near Neighbour Countries** (i.e. Albania, Algeria, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Egypt, Georgia, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Moldova, Morocco, the Palestinian Authority, Russia, Syria, Tunisia and Ukraine) to participate in COST Actions on the basis of mutual benefit.

Once their participation is approved, researchers from Near Neighbour Countries' institutions can participate in the COST Action on the same basis as the COST Countries that have signed the Memorandum of Understanding of the COST Action – with the exception of the right to vote in the Management Committees or Working Groups of the Action. Up to two researchers from Near

Neighbour Countries, one per institution can be eligible for reimbursement to the Management Committee of the COST Action.

Moreover, COST is also open to **global cooperation** and allows researchers from International Partner Countries to participate in COST Actions on the basis of ascertained mutual benefit. However, researchers affiliated to institutions from International Partner Countries whose participation in a COST Action has been approved are not eligible for reimbursement. Please consult this link for more detailed information on participation of researchers from the so called International Partner Countries:

http://www.cost.eu/about_cost/strategy/international_cooperation/ipc

8. COST Support for EU-13 and other Inclusiveness Target Countries

COST's strong emphasis on geographical spread includes less research-intensive COST Member Countries, the so called COST **Inclusiveness Target Countries** (ITCs).

The ITCs are Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Croatia, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta, Montenegro, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Republic of Serbia and Turkey.

To support a stronger participation of researchers from ITCs, COST Action activities focus on leadership, i.e. encouraging researchers and institutions in ITCs to set up and lead COST Actions, as well as manage COST Action grants and to increase researchers' visibility and connection, no matter their location, age or gender, to leading European science hubs.

This strong focus on ITCs is evidenced by the intention that half of the COST budget will be dedicated to activities fulfilling the objectives above, with a focus on engaging researchers in ITCs.

A special support targeting research administrators from the EU-13 is given via the **BESTPRAC** project. BESTPRAC is a targeted network (not a regular COST Action) to establish a **network for the administrative, finance and legal services in universities, research organisations and related entities** supporting researchers involved in the lifecycle of transnational external competition based (in particular European funded) projects in order to exchange experiences and share and develop best practices, encourage knowledge sharing, knowledge transfer and increased efficiency.

Specifically, the network establishes connections between research projects administrators (including legal, administrative and financial staff in universities and other research institutions) to overcome their isolation, stimulate mobility and encourage professional development.

BESTPRAC runs three dedicated working groups:

Working group 1 (Administration) covers issues relating to the overall management of externally funded research projects. Through meetings, training schools, and workplace exchange, issues



related to the establishment of a project (tools, methods and procedures); cross-cultural barriers; overall reporting, timesheets and closing of projects; and audit are addressed

Working group 2 (Finance) addresses through meetings and summer schools issues (e.g. accounting practices, VAT, overhead, exchange rates, audit) relating to financial aspects of preparing and running cross-European projects.

Working group 3 (Legal) addresses through meetings, training events and workshops issues relating to the legal framework of the projects such as a new framework programme standard contract and consortium agreement, IPR, and IPR in working with third parties, patenting and technology transfer, international legal frameworks.

MIRRIS supports several BESTPRAC's training activities on the input side, e.g. to strategically and synergistically use ESIF⁶ money for increased participation in Horizon2020. As an example, input from MIRRIS is used for the BESTPRAC Training School on "**Administration of research funding: dealing with several funding sources (for non-university research organisations in inclusiveness targeted countries)**", which will be held in September 27-29, 2016 in Vienna, Austria. In this way, results of MIRRIS are sustainably used beyond the lifetime of the project.

For more information about this training school, please consult <http://www.bestprac.eu/home/>

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About the MIRRIS project:

The **MIRRIS** project aims at encouraging a better exploitation of European research and innovation programmes and participation in the European Research Area (ERA) by setting up a process of analysis, dialogue, mutual learning among key concerned stakeholders, namely research, innovation and institutional actors. There are countries lagging behind in the effectiveness of exploiting EU funded programs in the field of R&D&I, on which MIRRIS targets its activities: Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. Through an extensive policy learning exercise to identify barriers and to identify how innovation systems can better address the participation to the ERA, MIRRIS supports these countries to better exploit the European research and innovation programmes.

⁶ ESIF= European Structural and Investment Funds