European Commission

# Talent Ecosystems: Building Sustainable Research Careers

## Results from the cluster event of 29.09.2026



Jürgen Janger, Gareth O'Neill

*October 2026*

**EUROPEAN COMMISSION**

European Research Executive Agency (REA)
Department C — Future Society
Unit C.4 — Reforming European R&I and Research Infrastructures

*Contact: Stijn DELAURE & Athanasia MOUNGOU*

*E-mail: REA-HE-ERA@ec.europa.eu*

*European Commission*
*B-1049 Brussels*

# Talent Ecosystems

## Showcasing synergies, first feedback to policy, and improving impact of future grants

European Research Executive Agency (REA)
Horizon Europe – Reforming and enhancing the European R&I system

2026

Manuscript completed in October 2026

First edition

This document has been prepared for the European Commission however it reflects the views only of the authors, and the European Commission is not liable for any consequence stemming from the reuse of this publication.

Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2026

© European Union, 2026



The reuse policy of European Commission documents is implemented by Commission Decision 2011/833/EU of 12 December 2011 on the reuse of Commission documents (OJ L 330, 14.12.2011, p. 39). Unless otherwise noted, the reuse of this document is authorised under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) licence (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). This means that reuse is allowed provided appropriate credit is given and any changes are indicated.

PDF ISBN 978-92-95245-00-6 doi:10.2848/0837727 JW-01-26-022-EN-N

# Contents

**Summary** ..... **8**

**1. Introduction** ..... **9**

1.1. Policy background ..... 9

1.2. The event and this report ..... 10

**2. Project results and cooperation** ..... **12**

2.1. Introduction ..... 12

2.2. The portfolio at a glance ..... 12

2.3. What the projects actually do: the mechanisms activated ..... 14

2.3.1. Diagnosis and co-creation: putting European frameworks to the test ..... 16
2.3.2. Organisational change: from diagnosis to action plans ..... 17
2.3.3. Career services: linking organisations and careers ..... 17
2.3.4. Competence development: training is ubiquitous, recognition is the open question ..... 18
2.3.5. Ecosystem connectors: platforms, placements and partnerships ..... 19
2.3.6. What can be scaled across the ERA ..... 20

2.4. What makes mechanisms operational – first lessons ..... 21

2.4.1. Enabling factors ..... 21
2.4.2. Barriers ..... 22

2.5. Involvement of the private sector, start-ups and scale-ups ..... 23

2.6. Cooperation across projects so far ..... 24

2.7. Conclusions ..... 24

**3. First feedback to policy** ..... **26**

3.1. Introduction ..... 26

3.2. Known issues, confirmed from the ground ..... 27

3.3. Research careers cannot be shaped at project level alone ..... 28

3.4. Recognising entrepreneurial and intersectoral experience ..... 29

3.5. Platforms, scalability and the ERA Talent Platform ..... 30

3.6. Conclusions ..... 32

3.7. Recommendations by target group ..... 33

**4. Increasing the impact of future grants ..... 37**

4.1. Introduction ..... 37

4.2. What should talent ecosystems achieve? ..... 37

4.3. Event-based suggestions for future applicants ..... 40

4.4. Conclusions ..... 45

**5. Annex ..... 46**

5.1. Additional material for the report ..... 46

# Summary

This report summarises the Talent Ecosystems cluster event (Brussels, 29 September 2026). A year after their start, with about two more years to go, the projects have largely completed their diagnostic work and are moving to implementation.

**Project results so far.** The projects' gap analyses are their most advanced result. One type compares researchers' competences with what they need, often using ResearchComp; the other compares organisations' formal commitment to the Charter for Researchers with what researchers experience. Both help trigger organisational change. Two activation logics can be distinguished: organisations changing their own practices through Charter-based action plans and career services, and projects building ecosystem connectors such as digital platforms, placements and partnerships. The most frequent mechanisms are digital platforms, modular training, career guidance and mentoring, and partnerships with non-academic organisations, all framed by the Charter for Researchers.

Some results can easily be extended across the ERA, such as digital platforms, online training and diagnostic tools. Others, such as organisational change and regional partnerships, cannot simply be copied: other organisations can adopt the approach but must go through the process themselves. Companies are mostly involved indirectly, through clusters, innovation agencies and service providers rather than as research-employing partners; start-ups feature mainly as a career option for researchers, through entrepreneurship and IP training.

**First feedback to policy.** Though drawn only from participating organisations, the projects' evidence confirms known issues: uncertain career progression, fragmented and project-dependent support, and limited intersectoral mobility. Skills training is in high demand but rarely rewarded in career progression. Careers cannot be shaped at project level alone: the projects' results depend on, and work best together with, decisions by institutions, funders and national policy on career structures, funding and assessment. Lasting impact requires organisations to take ownership of what the projects pilot – career services, action plans, training – and integrate it into their regular, core-funded activities. Founders whose start-up fails should be able to return to academia, bringing valuable ecosystem experience. Project platforms need to connect with the ERA Talent Platform and EURAXESS.

**Increasing impact of future grants.** Future calls face two strategic choices: whether to emphasise the links between research organisations and employers, or research careers more broadly, and whether to favour regional or transnational ecosystems. For applicants, the pilots' experience suggests building on existing results, involving research-intensive companies with concrete roles, for instance through technology transfer offices, connecting platforms to European initiatives, planning early for sustainability, and setting objectives that match what a coordination and support action can realistically achieve.

# 1. Introduction

This report summarises the cluster event "Talent Ecosystems: Building Sustainable Research Careers", held on 29 September 2026 in Brussels and online, which brought together ten Talent Ecosystem pilot projects (see Box 1) funded under Horizon Europe.[1] It presents the projects' first results, their feedback to policy and lessons for future grants.

**Box 1 – What are Talent Ecosystems?**

Talent Ecosystems are defined as "cohesive and interdependent systems, where a balanced composition of both education and training providers and employers of researchers, especially from the non-academic sector, cooperate closely to promote attractive and sustainable careers for researchers, in particular for early-career researchers, tailored to the needs of the research labour market".[2] In other words, the concept aims at long-lasting collaborations between one or more clusters of companies – for instance in pharmaceuticals, automotive, renewable energies or nanotechnologies – and one or more clusters of training providers, such as universities, that can deliver skilled researchers and other R&I talent in these fields. Unlike other EU support mechanisms such as the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA), Talent Ecosystems grants do not fund researchers. They focus on transforming organisations: their HR environment, career services, and training and career development systems.

## 1.1. Policy background

Research careers are a long-standing priority of the European Research Area (ERA). Under the ERA Policy Agenda 2022–2024, Action 4 on attractive and sustainable research careers led to several results:

- the Council Recommendation on a European framework to attract and retain research, innovation and entrepreneurial talents, adopted in December 2023 together with a new European Charter for Researchers;
- the European Competence Framework for Researchers (ResearchComp) and its self-assessment tool;
- the ERA Talent Platform, launched in 2024, bringing together EURAXESS, RESAVER, the Research and Innovation Careers Observatory and other initiatives;
- a mutual learning exercise on research careers among Member States;

[1] Recording: https://webcast.ec.europa.eu/talent-ecosystems-cluster-event-2026-09-29

[2] Horizon Europe Work Programme 2026–2027, topic on Talent Ecosystems

- the Talent Ecosystems pilot call in 2024, with €20 million for ten projects, and the upcoming call for proposals in 2027, with €29 million for up to 15 additional projects (opening in December 2026, closing in March 2027).

Under the ERA Policy Agenda 2025–2027, research careers have become one of the ERA structural policies, steered in the ERA Forum by a policy group co-chaired by Portugal and the Coimbra Group. The topic is also central to the Choose Europe for Science initiative and to the planned ERA Act.

The ten Talent Ecosystem projects (see section 2.2 of this report) were selected from 49 proposals under the topic HORIZON-WIDERA-2024-ERA-02-03 "Talent ecosystems for attractive early research careers – pilot". The call asked organisations that train researchers and those that employ them to cooperate to make early research careers more attractive and sustainable, ease intersectoral mobility, and support organisational change in line with the Charter. The pilots test how this can be done at the level of whole organisations and ecosystems, and they are expected to provide policy feedback on progress and obstacles. They started between June and October 2025. The 2027 call builds on the pilots' experience. Besides the ten pilots, several related EU-funded initiatives presented their work and took part in the discussions at the cluster event:

- ReSkillSpan, a Horizon Europe project that develops training in transversal and entrepreneurial skills for researchers of all career stages, based on a ResearchComp gap analysis, to support careers inside and outside academia;
- ERA-CAREERS and CareerEnhance, two recently started projects that build communities of practice to translate the European Charter for Researchers and related frameworks into institutional practice in an intersectoral context;
- FORESEE, the EURAXESS network of national representatives, which is reorganising EURAXESS services in coordination with the ERA Talent Platform;
- RESAVER, the pension fund for internationally mobile researchers, moving between countries and research performing organisations.

## 1.2. The event and this report

The event was organised by the ten projects together with DG Research and Innovation (RTD.A2; ERA, Spreading Excellence and Research Careers unit) and the European Research Executive Agency (REA.C4; Reforming R&I and Research Infrastructures unit). Around 100 participants attended on site, and a large audience followed online (close to 1,000 registered participants), including

policy makers, research-performing and research-funding organisations, industry, training providers and early-career researchers.

The event was structured along three sessions: progress of the projects and synergies between them, first feedback to policy, and how to increase the impact of future grants. This report follows the same structure:

- **Chapter 2** presents what the projects have done so far, how they cooperate and create synergies, and how start-ups and scale-ups are involved.
- **Chapter 3** summarises first feedback to policy, addressed to EU policy makers, in particular to the ERA Forum Structural Policy Group on research careers.
- **Chapter 4** draws lessons for future grants, as input to guidance for applicants to the 2027 call for Talent Ecosystems.

The report draws on several sources:

- the project presentations and the moderated discussions at the event;
- questions submitted by the online audience, a few of them answered in writing by Commission services; the most relevant are taken up in Chapters 3 and 4;
- an automatically generated transcript of the event, which does not identify speakers;
- the meeting notes of the rapporteur;
- a cross-project white paper compiled by the projects and published at the event;
- project information available online, in particular the REA overview of the ten projects.

The event was dense and the material extensive. This report does not document everything said or presented; it extracts the main insights and presents them in a structured way. To make the projects comparable, it sometimes describes their work in terms that differ from their own; these descriptions are the rapporteur's reading, not necessarily the projects' own. Several caveats apply. The evidence is largely self-reported and comes from an early stage of implementation, with about two more years to go. Many figures are targets rather than achieved results, and the projects' surveys use different instruments and non-representative samples, so they should be read as indications rather than robust findings. The rapporteur used an AI assistant (Claude, Anthropic) to support the analysis and drafting, including summarising the transcript and project materials, proposing the classification of instruments in Table 2 and Annex Table A1, and drafting text. All content was reviewed and edited by the rapporteur, who is responsible for the final text and any errors.

# 2. Project results and cooperation

## 2.1. Introduction

About a year into implementation, the projects have largely completed their diagnostic work, while most services, platforms and training programmes are being designed, piloted or launched. This chapter looks at what the projects actually do. After a brief overview of the portfolio, it maps their work onto a common set of instruments, since projects often describe similar activities in different terms. It then summarises first lessons on what makes these mechanisms work, the involvement of the private sector including start-ups and scale-ups, and cooperation across the ten projects.

## 2.2. The portfolio at a glance

Four projects are field-agnostic (ARCOE, CROSS, SECURE2, SMART Researchers); the others focus on STEM (ECROS), health (AttractAdria, BREATH) or deep tech and digital technologies (DeepTechSeeds, INSIGHT, NextTechTalents). Table 1 summarises their objectives, expected outcomes and contribution to the ERA. Participants come from 29 countries. The portfolio has a strong 'Widening Participation' profile: six of ten coordinators and 74 of the 125 participations – an organisation's involvement in one project, including associated partners; 121 organisations in total, as four take part in two projects – accounting for about 58% of the EU contribution, are in Widening countries. Higher education institutions account for the largest number of participations (42), followed by private for-profit entities (28), other organisations such as (researcher) associations, clusters and EIT communities (25), research organisations (20) and public bodies (10). Public authorities are formally involved mainly in BREATH and AttractAdria, at both regional and national level; research funders such as AGAUR (BREATH), FECYT (CROSS) and UEFISCDI (INSIGHT, SECURE2) also take part.

The consortia follow different **territorial logics**. BREATH (health innovation in Catalonia, Flanders and Lithuania) and AttractAdria (Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia) are organised around regional ecosystems, and ECROS is anchored in a European University alliance (EUt+). The other seven are transnational networks of five to thirteen countries, implementing their activities in the partners' local ecosystems. How regional and transnational approaches compare in building talent ecosystems is a question the pilots may help to answer.

**Table 1 – The ten Talent Ecosystem pilot projects – objectives, expected outcomes and contribution to the ERA**

| Project | Focus | Objectives | Expected outcomes |
|---|---|---|---|
| ARCOE | Agnostic | • Harmonise recruitment and career standards in five Widening universities<br>• Train 350 researchers in deep-tech entrepreneurship and IP<br>• Long-term academia–industry networks | • HRS4R in 15 organisations<br>• Self-sustaining virtual talent hub<br>• 500+ users of which at least 350 trained researchers |
| AttractAdria | Health | • Strengthen institutional frameworks and research support capacities for sustainable research careers<br>• Researchers' employability and digital skills<br>• Academia–hospital–industry collaboration and mobility | • More attractive careers via HRS4R, mentoring and support hubs<br>• Lasting academia–industry–hospital links and mobility pathways |
| BREATH | Health | • Lasting talent ecosystem across three regions<br>• Career paths and skills for careers within and beyond academia<br>• Tailored career guidance | • Multiregional and regional partnership agreements<br>• Intersectoral micro-credentials and career guidance in health innovation |
| CROSS | Agnostic | • Career development via the CROSS platform and a ResearchComp community of practice<br>• Charter adoption and HRS4R preparation<br>• Intersectoral networks around partners | • Platform linking self-assessment to skills development<br>• HR Excellence in Research repository<br>• Lasting community of practice |
| DeepTechSeeds | Deep tech | • Adapt the Charter to deep tech<br>• Train 500 researchers in venture creation, IP and pitching<br>• 10+ academia–industry partnerships | • Hiring criteria valuing placements, patents and start-ups<br>• Platform linking 500+ researchers and 50+ companies<br>• 10+ placement schemes |
| ECROS | STEM | • Analyse early-career researchers' needs<br>• Integrated guidance, mentoring and training across the alliance<br>• Industry orientation and placements | • Training catalogue linking providers and employers<br>• 480 researchers reached directly<br>• Results anchored in the alliance |
| INSIGHT | Green Deal, digital, deep tech | • Ecosystems linking academia, industry and public sector<br>• Charter-based organisational change, incl. in companies<br>• Training, mentoring and career support | • 50+ organisations engaged, 20+ collaborations<br>• 30 organisations adopting Charter principles<br>• Policy recommendations |
| NextTech Talents | Deep tech | • Mobility and employability through training and mentoring<br>• Mainstream ResearchComp and the Charter<br>• Map barriers and engage stakeholders | • Multi-sector alliances in Widening regions<br>• Catalogue of recruitment requirements<br>• Career services via training system and handbook |
| SECURE2 | Agnostic | • Adopt the Research Career Framework and HRS4R via action plans<br>• Competences and intersectoral mobility<br>• Mutual learning between institutions | • Career standards embedded in eight pilots<br>• Toolkits, incl. tenure-track-like models<br>• Policy briefs on researcher development, recruitment and retention |
| SMART Researchers | Agnostic | • Charter-aligned HR transformation<br>• ResearchComp-based micro-credentials and certification<br>• Institutional career support structures | • Seven career support centres<br>• Transferable micro-credential model<br>• Widening institutions better integrated in the ERA |

*Source:* project presentations at the cluster event; outcomes as expected by the projects. Coordinators, partners, budgets and duration are available on the linked CORDIS pages.

The consortia also follow different models of cooperation with the private sector. Research-performing companies are full partners in a few projects – in AttractAdria, for instance, Genos, GlycanAge and JGL are partners, with Genos hosting one of the project's two Research Support Hubs – and associated partners without EU funding in others, particularly in BREATH. Several projects reach companies mainly through intermediaries, as BREATH does with regional health clusters, NextTechTalents with the Cluj IT cluster and ARCOE with the

RoHealth cluster. Others engage companies through activities rather than formal membership: DeepTechSeeds through challenges and matchmaking, NextTechTalents through letters of cooperation with mentors and experts. Many for-profit partners are service providers rather than employers of researchers. Section 2.5 discusses what these models mean for engaging research-employing firms.

## 2.3. What the projects actually do: the mechanisms activated

Projects describe their work in their own vocabulary. A “Virtual Talent Innovation Ecosystem Hub”, a “digital services platform”, a “Digital Matchmaking Platform” and “Training Pathways” are all online platforms, but with different functions; “Career Support Centres”, “Research Support Hubs” and “inter-institutional career services” are all organisational career services. Table 2 therefore maps what the projects do onto five families of instruments:

- **A. Diagnosis and co-creation** – audits, surveys and participatory processes confronting European frameworks with organisational practice and researchers’ experience;
- **B. Organisational change** – instruments through which organisations change their own HR policies, career structures and recruitment rules;
- **C. Career services** – career units, guidance, mentoring and the professional capacity to deliver them;
- **D. Competence development** – training, entrepreneurship education and recognition of competences;
- **E. Ecosystem connectors –** platforms, matching, placements, partnership agreements and networks linking researchers and organisations across sectors and regions**.**

Families B and C change research organisations from within, family E builds bridges to other organisations – in particular firms – and family D addresses researchers directly. Family A cuts across all of them and is, so far, the most advanced. The matrix in Table 2 distinguishes each project's flagship mechanism from other components of its work; Annex Table A1 gives the source for each entry. All projects started with some form of diagnosis. The most frequent concrete mechanisms are digital platforms and modular training (eight projects each), followed by career guidance and mentoring, needs and skills-gap analyses, and partnerships and networks (seven each). Support for implementing the European Charter for Researchers appears in nine projects, but less as a separate mechanism than as a common framework: the call requires participating organisations to hold the HR Excellence in Research Award or commit to it.

## Table 2 – Indicative typology of instruments used by the ten Talent Ecosystem projects

| Instrument | ARCOE | Attract-Adria | BREATH | CROSS | DeepTech Seeds | ECROS | INSIGHT | NextTech Talents | SECURE2 | SMART Res. | Σ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **A. Diagnosis and co-creation** | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Organisational audit / maturity mapping (Charter, HRS4R, career framework) | ○ | ● | | ○ | | | ○ | | ● | ● | 6 |
| Needs and skills-gap analysis of researchers, supervisors and employers | ○ | | ● | ○ | ○ | ● | | ○ | | ● | 7 |
| **B. Organisational change** | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Support for Charter / HRS4R implementation | ○ | ○ | ○ | ● | ○ | | ● | ○ | ○ | ○ | 9 |
| Co-designed action plans, roadmaps or organisational-change proposals | | ● | ○ | ○ | | ○ | | | ● | ● | 6 |
| New career-path models (career stability, tenure-track-like positions) | | | | | | | | | ● | | 1 |
| Reform of recruitment, assessment and promotion criteria | ○ | | | | ○ | | | ○ | ○ | | 4 |
| **C. Career services** | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Dedicated career-support units or hubs | | ● | ○ | | | ○ | | | | ● | 4 |
| Career guidance, counselling and mentoring for researchers | | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | | | 7 |
| Capacity building and peer learning for HR staff, supervisors, career professionals | ○ | | ○ | ○ | | | ● | ○ | ○ | | 6 |
| **D. Competence development** | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Modular training in transversal and technical skills | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | | ○ | ● | ● | | ○ | 8 |
| Entrepreneurship, IP / commercialisation training | ○ | ○ | ○ | | ○ | | | ○ | | | 5 |
| ResearchComp-based assessment, micro-credentials | ○ | | ○ | ○ | | | | ○ | ○ | ● | 6 |
| **E. Ecosystem connectors** | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Digital platform or online hub | ● | ○ | ○ | ● | ● | ● | ○ | ○ | | | 8 |
| Talent matching with employers (matchmaking, challenges, events) | ○ | ○ | | | ○ | | | | | | 3 |
| Placements, job shadowing and intersectoral mobility schemes | | ○ | | | ○ | ○ | | | | | 3 |
| Regional and sectoral partnerships and networks | ○ | ○ | ● | ○ | ○ | | ○ | ○ | | | 7 |

● = flagship mechanism, i.e. presented by the project as its activated mechanism or tool, or named as its key mechanism in the Session 1 panel; ○ = other component of the project's work; Σ = number of projects. Source: rapporteur's classification; sources per entry in Annex Table A1.

### 2.3.1. Diagnosis and co-creation: putting European frameworks to the test

All ten projects began with substantial diagnostic work (Table 2, family A) – as is to be expected about a year into implementation – and this is where most tangible results exist so far. The projects use two broad types of gap analysis. The first compares the competences researchers have with those they need, often using ResearchComp as a reference. SMART Researchers asked early-stage researchers and their mentors how important each of the 39 ResearchComp sub-competences is and how well it is currently supported. BREATH mapped the competences and career paths of PhD holders and carried out a Delphi study asking senior professionals from academia, industry, healthcare and public administration which competence gaps matter most, considering not only ResearchComp, but also GreenComp, DigComp, Science4Policy competence framework, EntreComp and the key Deep Tech skills identified by the DeepTech Talent Initiative. CROSS asked non-academic employers which competences they need and how they perceive ResearchComp.

The second type of gap analysis compares what organisations have formally committed to with what happens in practice. SMART Researchers contrasted the views of top management, deans and researchers on how well their institutions perform against the Charter's principles. SECURE2's pilot institutions mapped their own maturity against the actions of the SECURE Research Career Framework, developed in the predecessor project SECURE. ARCOE and INSIGHT assessed how far Charter principles are embedded in day-to-day HR practice. AttractAdria reviewed existing practices and policies.

Both types of analysis have proven useful for triggering change. They make visible what is often implicit: where the support researchers receive falls short of what they consider important, and where management's view of what is in place differs from what researchers experience. This gives management concrete starting points, and it makes it possible to prioritise action plans and training by measured need rather than by assumption. SMART Researchers did not rely on surveys alone: it organised **moderated workshops in which top management, deans and researchers discussed the results together**, so that decision makers saw first-hand how researchers experience their institution. The process itself also mobilises stakeholders: those involved in designing the analysis see their problems taken seriously and take ownership of the follow-up. Some ECROS partners have already adjusted institutional practice on the basis of first results. At the Faculty of Technical Sciences of the University of Novi Sad, which coordinates SMART Researchers, the resulting strategic action plan is being adopted by its scientific-teaching council as a five-year strategy.

### 2.3.2. Organisational change: from diagnosis to action plans

The European Charter for Researchers is the common anchor for instrument family B (Table 2): nine projects support its implementation, often through the HR Excellence in Research Award (formerly known as HRS4R award). ARCOE supports the HRS4R application process in 15 participant organisations, CROSS has built an HR Excellence in Research Repository of practical guidance, and SECURE2 provides HRS4R training for its pilots. Some extend the implementation of the principles in the Charter beyond academia: DeepTechSeeds adapts it to deep tech, and INSIGHT develops a tool for companies to assess their readiness to employ researchers. The most developed mechanism is the sequence of maturity mapping, co-designed action plans and monitored implementation, formalised in SECURE2's three-phase methodology and SMART Researchers' seven strategic action plans for 2026–2031. The approach respects different starting points and can be mainstreamed to other institutions.

The projects do not fund research positions, salaries or researcher mobility, which lie outside the scope of the call. They can, however, analyse career structures and propose and pilot measures to improve them. Most of their work concentrates on the conditions surrounding research careers – transparency, support and skills – but some address career structures directly. SECURE has developed **a toolkit for tenure-track-like models** to improve career stability; its partners identified this as the most demanding action area, requiring commitment beyond project level. DeepTechSeeds proposes that **hiring scorecards value placements, patents and start-ups alongside publications**, ARCOE works on harmonised recruitment standards, and NextTechTalents has compiled a 65-item catalogue of recruitment requirements. How far such measures can address career attractiveness, and what complementary measures at organisational or national level would be needed, is discussed in Chapter 3.

### 2.3.3. Career services: linking organisations and careers

Career services are where institutional and intersectoral ambitions meet, guiding (early-career) researchers towards job opportunities in- and outside the organisation and maintaining intersectoral cooperation in career development (Table 2, family C). SMART Researchers is setting up seven Career Support Centres with Competence Labs, which are scheduled to be operational by December 2026 and will serve researchers at all career stages. AttractAdria has established two Research Support Hubs, one at the University of Sarajevo and one **at Genos, a private research company** in Croatia – a rare case of a support structure hosted outside academia. The hubs are designed to offer mentoring, training and mobility support. ECROS pools career services and mentoring across the nine universities of the EUt+ alliance. Its diagnosis is telling: **the problem is less that opportunities for researchers do not exist than that**

**they are not presented to researchers in an accessible, connected way** – which pooling and a single access point are meant to solve.

Seven projects provide career guidance or mentoring to researchers (AttractAdria, BREATH, CROSS, DeepTechSeeds, ECROS, INSIGHT, NextTechTalents). Several also build capacity among HR managers (INSIGHT, ARCOE), talent managers in academic and non-academic organisations (BREATH) and career professionals – CROSS's ResearchComp Community of Practice has more than 450 members from over 70 institutions. Guidance towards careers outside academia is, in effect, an intersectoral hiring function. Whether these services outlive project funding depends on institutions making them a core responsibility (see Chapter 3).

### 2.3.4. Competence development: training is ubiquitous, recognition is the open question

Eight projects develop training (Table 2, family D), so the distinction lies in how. The trend is towards modular, needs-based offers. NextTechTalents' Training System and INSIGHT's Training Pathways are delivered online, and ECROS is compiling a catalogue of transversal and industrial training. BREATH's modular training includes intersectoral micro-credentials co-designed with non-academic actors. SMART Researchers prioritises its learning units by measured gaps, which in its three countries are largest for self-management competences such as coping with pressure. Some training is sector-oriented: AttractAdria is developing and delivering training in digital and data competences for personalised healthcare and organises clinical and industrial training. Most training presented at the event, however, addresses transversal competences, entrepreneurship and IP, rather than skills identified through a needs analysis with companies in a specific sector.

Entrepreneurship and intellectual property (IP) are addressed mainly in deep tech: DeepTechSeeds aims to train 500 researchers and ARCOE 350, and AttractAdria adds IP training in health. The need is visible in the data: among DeepTechSeeds' survey respondents, fewer than a quarter had received any formal IP training.

Six projects build on ResearchComp for self-assessment, competence mapping, micro-credentials or certification. SMART Researchers is developing **a layered system of credentials**: small digital badges for individual competences, which can be combined into micro-credentials for a competence area and, at the highest level, into certificates covering ResearchComp as a whole. CROSS builds on the Commission's ResearchComp self-assessment tool, which shows researchers where they stand; the CROSS platform is designed to help them take the next step – **from "where do I stand?" to "what do I do about it?"**, for example by pointing them to suitable training and career development actions. Recognition remains an open question. Most projects use ResearchComp to target training

and to help researchers identify their gaps; using it to show employers the range of competences researchers bring is less developed. First steps exist: CROSS introduced the framework to employers in its interviews, ARCOE translates it into ESCO, the labour market's own classification, and projects proposed integrating it into talent-matching platforms (see Section 3.5). Employers interviewed by CROSS were mostly not yet familiar with ResearchComp, and asked for its competences to be described in clearer, more practical terms. Whether micro-credentials are recognised across institutions and countries, and whether employers accept them as evidence of what someone can do, is yet to be shown.

### 2.3.5. Ecosystem connectors: platforms, placements and partnerships

A digital platform is the most frequent single instrument (Table 2, family E): all projects except SECURE2 and SMART Researchers are developing one, and for four (ARCOE, CROSS, DeepTechSeeds, ECROS) it is the flagship. Behind the label are three functions: matching researchers with employers (ARCOE, DeepTechSeeds), one-stop access to services and guidance (ECROS, CROSS, BREATH's Career Path Guidance Platform) and learning (INSIGHT, NextTechTalents, the latter with an AI-supported knowledge engine). ECROS stressed that **the platform is not the talent ecosystem itself but its interface**. The ecosystem consists of the alliance's universities and early-career researchers, and the relationships between them and their partners. Among these partners, companies and other non-academic employers play a central role: they employ researchers, host placements and help shape training. The platform gives all of them a common point of access. The same holds across the portfolio: platforms are tools within an ecosystem, not a substitute for it. Platforms are also meant to carry results beyond project end. The number of platforms was one of the most discussed issues at the event. Participants raised the question of how to avoid a "graveyard of platforms" after project end, how project platforms relate to the ERA Talent Platform and EURAXESS, and whether reaching SMEs requires regional rather than pan-European entry points. The discussion suggested three answers: connecting project platforms to the ERA Talent Platform and EURAXESS rather than running them in isolation, planning from the start who maintains a platform after the project ends, and combining European platforms with regional entry points that reach SMEs. These are developed in Section 3.5 and, for future applicants, in Section 4.3.

Several projects also build physical and relational connectors: job shadowing, industrial and clinical training and new mobility mechanisms (AttractAdria), industrial placements and a planned alliance-level industrial PhD programme (ECROS), and placement schemes, matchmaking events with the Eclipse Foundation and an Open Challenge pairing researcher teams with SME mentors (DeepTechSeeds). BREATH's **co-created partnership agreements** – three regional agreements in Catalonia, Flanders and Lithuania, each bringing together universities, research centres, hospitals, companies, clusters and public

authorities, and one multiregional agreement linking the three regions – were presented as the mechanism that turns declared collaboration into joint activity. The agreements are linked to the EU Pact for Skills.[3] Other projects build networks, often regionally anchored. NextTechTalents runs its pilots with regional facilitators such as the Cluj IT cluster,[4] and twenty organisations have signed letters of cooperation committing to take part, for example as mentors or experts. CROSS builds local clusters around its partners in Czechia and Saxony, Belgium, Cyprus and Finland. INSIGHT is in the process of setting up five sectoral networks in digital transformation, deep tech and the Green Deal.

### 2.3.6. What can be scaled across the ERA

Asked which elements of their work could realistically be scaled across the ERA – that is, used beyond the participating organisations by other institutions, regions and countries – projects pointed mainly to methods and tools rather than to specific programmes. How easily a mechanism spreads depends largely on its nature. The more a mechanism is digital and codified, the more easily it scales; the more it depends on people, places and organisational decisions, the more it transfers as a model that others need to implement themselves. In the first case, the same instrument is extended to more users and organisations; in the second, other organisations adopt the approach and go through the process themselves.

Diagnostic instruments are among the most readily transferable. SECURE2's career framework toolkit and maturity mapping are designed as generic self-assessment tools that any research organisation can apply to its own situation. They are freely available, and **Eurodoc, ICoRSA the Marie Curie Alumni Association already promote them** among their members. SMART Researchers' ResearchComp-based gap assessment can likewise be applied in other institutions. What transfers is the method; each organisation still needs to run its own diagnosis.

Organisational change and career services transfer as models. Action plans cannot be copied: each organisation has to go through the process of analysis, prioritisation and adoption itself. ECROS described the transferable element as a shared architecture – common needs analysis and common guidelines for mentoring, training and industry collaboration – developed at alliance level and then adapted by each partner. Career services need staff and resources in each organisation. They spread through replication, or through pooling across institutions as in a university alliance.

[3] The Pact for Skills is an EU initiative bringing together public and private organisations committed to upskilling and reskilling: https://pact-for-skills.ec.europa.eu

[4] Cluj IT is a cluster of IT companies, universities and public institutions in Cluj-Napoca, Romania: https://www.clujit.ro

Training and competence recognition scale more easily, especially online. SMART Researchers stressed that its micro-credential architecture is transferable: the structure – the levels from badges to certificates, and the assessment criteria linked to ResearchComp – stays the same, while the training content can be adapted to institutions and sectors. NextTechTalents added from its pilots that the content and delivery of a training system need to be adapted to each country, involving the HR and IT staff who implement it locally. Communities of practice, such as CROSS's ResearchComp Community of Practice, can also grow at low cost per member.

Digital platforms are the most scalable by nature: once developed, they can serve additional users and countries at low additional cost. Their reach among employers, and their integration with the ERA Talent Platform and EURAXESS, are the main questions (see Chapter 3). Regional partnerships and networks, by contrast, are place-based and rest on trust built over time. They transfer as a governance model – BREATH speaks of creating "collaboration spaces" where decisions on talent are taken together – rather than being extended to other regions. Extending place-based industry–academia pipelines across borders also meets policy barriers – differences in national frameworks, limited mutual recognition of competences and the portability of social security – which are discussed in Section 3.3.

Scaling the digital and codified mechanisms at European level would require connecting platforms and tools to the ERA Talent Platform and agreeing common baseline instruments across projects. The others spread as organisations take services over into their core activities (see Chapter 3) and as other organisations and regions adopt the approaches. This says nothing about value: the place-based and organisational mechanisms may well have the deepest effects, and future calls can encourage their uptake (see Chapter 4).

## 2.4. What makes mechanisms operational – first lessons

### 2.4.1. Enabling factors

Asked what makes their mechanisms work and what shows that stakeholders are engaged beyond paper, the four projects on the first panel converged on a few enabling factors. The projects presented later in the day pointed in the same direction:

- **Co-creation with the wider ecosystem from the start** – involving companies, clusters, public authorities and researcher associations from the kick-off and letting them shape the design, not only consulting them (BREATH, ECROS);

- **Ownership within the organisation** – involving top management, HR departments and researcher representatives in developing and negotiating action plans, so that these are formally adopted and resourced (SMART Researchers, SECURE2);
- **Tailoring to maturity**, with each institution selecting and adapting its own actions (SECURE2);
- **Anchoring in existing structures and trust** - a European University alliance (ECROS), permanent units (SMART Researchers, and AttractAdria's Research Support Hubs), regional clusters (NextTechTalents), a community of practice (CROSS), or an existing network from a previous project (SECURE2, now in its second funding phase) – backed by a strong, committed coordination team.

First examples of engagement beyond the consortium are emerging. SMART Researchers's Strategic action plan is being adopted as an institutional five-year strategy (see 2.3.1), and institutions outside the consortium asked to join, which fed into a follow-up project (ERA-CAREERS). ICoRSA, Eurodoc and the Marie Curie Alumni Association use and promote SECURE2's tools among their members. BREATH has submitted its partnership framework to the Pact for Skills, under which organisations can form regional and large-scale skills partnerships, so that the framework can be recognised and used beyond the project. The audience pointed to under-represented dimensions: research management, the reform of research assessment (CoARA), technology transfer offices, disciplinary differences and gender.

### 2.4.2. Barriers

The move from design to activation has been difficult in recurring ways:

- converting declared support into concrete responsibilities;
- limited engagement of individual companies;
- the lack of a shared language with firms and public authorities;
- stakeholder fatigue from repeated surveys and events;
- slow-moving universities and administrations;
- heterogeneous partners.

NextTechTalents added from its pilots that developing a training system is only the start. The real test is rolling it out to researchers and organisations in its pilot countries, where the HR and IT staff who implement it must be involved and one model does not fit all. INSIGHT reported difficulties even in identifying the right HR contacts in companies.

The barriers most likely to affect long-term sustainability are those that tie results to project funding: career services without a permanent home in the organisation, platforms without a plan or budget for maintenance after the project ends, and networks that depend on a few committed individuals.

Two constraints lie beyond project level. The first is the fragmented responsibility for supporting researchers' careers: researchers shape their own careers, but the support around them comes from funders, HR departments, doctoral schools and supervisors, without anyone responsible for the whole career path (SMART Researchers). The second is legal fragmentation, e.g. industrial-doctorate frameworks that exist on paper but are not operational or hindered by differing regulations in the universities (ECROS). Both are developed in Chapter 3.

## 2.5. Involvement of the private sector, start-ups and scale-ups

Formally, the private sector is well represented: 28 of the 125 participations (as defined in Section 2.2) are private for-profit entities. A closer look qualifies this. By a rough classification, about two-thirds of these are consultancies or companies offering services such as training, HR consulting, communication and event organisation, or innovation support. In terms of the call's distinction between those who train researchers and those who employ them, they mostly belong to the first group. Around ten appear to be R&D-performing technology, biotech or pharmaceutical firms – potential employers of researchers, and thus one of the main target groups of the call – which is less than a tenth of all participations. Several of these take part as associated partners: they contribute to project activities, for example through advice, hosting or testing, but receive no EU funding. Most of them are in the two health projects. Industry is also involved indirectly via intermediaries: EIT communities, clusters (e.g. Biocat, the Lithuanian Innovation Agency working on Life Sciences and the Flemish health innovation cluster in BREATH, Cluj IT in NextTechTalents, RoHealth in ARCOE), innovation hubs and the University Industry Innovation Network.

This matches what projects reported: engaging individual companies is the main difficulty in activating ecosystems. Firms support projects in principle but are hard to commit to concrete roles, do not know the European frameworks, want a common language centred on what researchers can do, and are wary of the cost of doctoral researchers. Whether consortium partnership is the right form of involvement for firms – rather than advisory roles, challenges, placements, alumni networks or industrial doctorates – is discussed in Chapter 4.

Start-ups and scale-ups appear mainly as a career destination rather than as partners or employers: entrepreneurship training (DeepTechSeeds, ARCOE, NextTechTalents) and DeepTechSeeds' Open Challenge are the main instruments, and the event offered little evidence of start-ups hosting placements

or co-designing training – which is not surprising, given start-ups' very limited resources. Two points stand out: (1) Researcher spin-offs are natural bridges that can draw larger firms into an ecosystem, as the Flanders Make case showed. There, dedicated valorisation and technology transfer staff, financed through the Flemish Industrial Research Fund, play a key role in building these links – a role that technology transfer offices could play more widely, since they usually already have relationships with companies from collaborative research and with the organisation's spin-offs. (2) Researchers whose start-up fails find it hard to return to academia because entrepreneurial experience is not recognised in academic assessment – which discourages entrepreneurial careers and weakens exactly this bridge.

## 2.6. Cooperation across projects so far

Cooperation has developed quickly, mainly through joint evidence and events. Beyond the cross-project white paper, which compiles the projects' first evidence and recommendations on research careers and on the implementation of the Charter in the participating organisations (discussed in Chapter 3), the ten projects co-organised the event with REA and DG RTD, with CROSS credited by others for driving communication among the projects. Some projects have adjusted budgets for joint events. CROSS has opened its platform (linked to skills development), HR Excellence in Research Repository, Community of Practice and a March 2027 conference in Prague to the cluster. Four organisations happen to take part in two projects each, which creates informal links between consortia. CROSS, DeepTechSeeds, and SMART Researchers took the lead of the three main sessions at the event; NextTechTalents coordinated the development of two project portfolio videos and created the group's visual for the event; all ten projects provided input and/or directly participated. The event also connected the pilots with the related initiatives introduced in Section 1.2.

At this stage, cooperation centres on exchanging evidence and visibility rather than on joint use of tools, common baseline instruments or a shared approach to platforms. This is to be expected: applicants do not know in advance which proposals will be selected, so coordinating concrete mechanisms across projects is hard to achieve in practice. Projects themselves noted overlaps between their activities and called for common approaches from the kick-off of future projects, with efficiency and continuity as key objectives. The 2027 call topic already foresees structured cooperation with the pilot projects.

## 2.7. Conclusions

About a year into implementation, the Talent Ecosystems projects have largely completed their diagnostic work. Several observations emerge:

- **Gap analyses are the most advanced result and a driver of change in their own right.** Comparing researchers' competences with what they need, often using ResearchComp as a reference, and comparing formal commitment to the Charter with what researchers experience, makes problems visible. It gives management concrete starting points and allows action plans and training to be prioritised by measured need. Involving stakeholders in the analysis creates ownership of the follow-up.
- **Two activation logics can be distinguished (Table 2):** organisations changing their own practices through Charter-based action plans and career services, and projects building ecosystem connectors, notably digital platforms, placements and partnerships. Projects combine the two in different proportions.
- **Career services feature in most projects,** from permanent career centres and research support hubs to services pooled across a university alliance, and link organisational change with intersectoral career paths. Whether they – and the projects' results more generally – last beyond project funding depends on organisations taking ownership and integrating them into their regular activities.
- **The projects act on careers through organisational change and services, not by funding researchers.** Unlike MSCA grants, the Talent Ecosystems grants do not fund salaries, positions or researcher mobility. Their effect on careers runs through career services, training and changes in organisations' HR practices. Deeper changes to career structures – new career-path models, recruitment and assessment criteria, structured intersectoral mobility – depend on decisions by the organisations themselves, as well as legal frameworks, and appear in a few projects as preparatory or pilot work. The number of project platforms raises the question of how they connect to the ERA Talent Platform and EURAXESS, taken up in Chapter 3.
- **The private sector is involved mainly through intermediaries and service providers**, with start-ups and scale-ups featuring mainly as a career destination. How to engage research-employing firms, and how to recognise entrepreneurial experience in academic careers, are central questions for the next phase.
- **Cooperation among the projects has developed quickly,** centring on joint evidence, events and the sharing of tools. Deeper coordination on concrete mechanisms is hard to achieve among consortia that did not know each other at the proposal stage. Projects see common approaches from the start of future projects as a way forward.
- **Methods and tools travel more easily than programmes.** Digital and codified instruments – diagnostic tools, modular training, platforms – scale readily. Organisational change, career services and regional partnerships transfer as models that others need to implement themselves.

# 3. First feedback to policy

## 3.1. Introduction

The call for the Talent Ecosystems pilots asks projects to provide policy feedback to the Commission and Member States on progress made, successes and obstacles encountered. This chapter summarises the first of such feedback, as presented and discussed at the cluster event. It is addressed in particular to the ERA Forum Structural Policy Group on research careers.

The feedback rests on the projects' baseline work, which includes the following:

- institutional audits and maturity assessments: seven organisations in SMART Researchers, eight pilot institutions assessed on 80 actions in SECURE2, organisational surveys in ARCOE, and 173 organisational responses from 17 countries in INSIGHT;
- surveys of researchers and mentors: around 250 early-stage researchers and some 180 mentors in SMART Researchers, 218 researcher and 164 industry and regional responses in DeepTechSeeds, and 155 PhD holders and 47 Delphi experts in BREATH;
- employer interviews: 42 non-academic employers in CROSS;
- a multi-stage literature, institutional, dedicated interviews and surveys analysis in ECROS.

The projects compiled this evidence in a joint white paper published at the event.[5] This evidence should be read with care. It is bottom-up evidence from the organisations taking part in the projects, collected with different instruments and samples that are not designed to be representative. The gaps identified are real for the organisations concerned, but they may not take the same form, or have the same size, in the many organisations that do not participate. Since the projects have been running for only about a year, part of the white paper describes ongoing pilots and planned targets rather than completed findings. At the same time, the picture that emerges is broadly consistent with larger-scale evidence, such as the indicators of the Research and Innovation Careers Observatory (ReICO) and earlier European surveys on researcher mobility and

[5] Talent Ecosystems pilot projects (2026), *The European Charter for Researchers in Modern Talent Ecosystems: Structural Gaps and Policy Pathways across the ERA*, white paper presented at the Talent Ecosystems cluster event, Brussels, 29 September 2026.

career paths.[6] The value of the projects' evidence lies less in new aggregate findings than in showing how known issues play out inside specific organisations, networks or consortia, and what they can do about them.

## 3.2. Known issues, confirmed from the ground

Across projects, several issues known from the literature reappear:

- **Career progression and stability**. In the DeepTechSeeds survey, almost half of the responding early-career researchers named the absence of clear career pathways as a major barrier. At the same time, they rated recruitment processes as fairly transparent. Uncertainty arises less at entry than in what follows. Among the eight SECURE2 pilot institutions, stability was the least developed area of the Research Career Framework, followed by mobility and interoperability.
- **Fragmented and project-dependent support.** In ARCOE's organisational survey, respondents rated how well developed different areas of support for researchers are in their organisations. Career guidance, institutional career strategies and supervisor training were rated lowest, all below three on a five-point scale. AttractAdria and SMART Researchers describe support that is spread across departments and dependent on individual supervisors and short-term projects.
- **A gap between formal commitment and day-to-day practice**. In INSIGHT's sample, about 40% of respondents had no knowledge of the Charter, and many did not know whether their organisation had formally committed to it. SMART Researchers finds that researchers perceive their institution's performance as a whole: weaknesses in one area, such as working conditions, colour the perception of all others. Partial improvements may therefore have limited effect on how researchers experience their organisation.
- **Skills without reward.** Demand for transversal skills training is high – ReSkillSpan received around 440 applications for its courses – but researchers returning to their institutions often find neither time to use these skills nor recognition of them in career progression. Professional development remains a personal effort rather than part of an institutional pathway. Training alone does not change careers if the career system does not value what is learned.
- **Intersectoral mobility**. It is valued in principle but remains limited in practice (ARCOE). Reasons mentioned at the event include the lack of

[6] See the ReICO hub, a joint initiative of the European Commission and the OECD: https://www.oecd.org/en/networks/research-and-innovation-careers-observatory/about-reico.html; and, for earlier survey evidence, the MORE studies: https://www.more-4.eu/

structured schemes and funding for moves between sectors, frameworks for industrial doctorates that exist on paper but are not operational, companies' concerns about the cost of employing PhD-level researchers, and the fact that experience outside academia is rarely recognised in academic careers. Employers interviewed by CROSS appreciate researchers' technical and analytical skills but point to a lack of practical experience in organisational settings.

- **Competence gaps**. These concern self-management (SMART Researchers), and intellectual property and market literacy. Among DeepTechSeeds' respondents, fewer than a quarter had received formal IP training.

## 3.3. Research careers cannot be shaped at project level alone

Projects were clear that the core of the career question lies beyond what an individual project can do. Career stability, salary structures, national funding systems, the legal status of doctoral candidates and the frameworks for industrial doctorates are decided by institutions, funders and national legislation. The mutual learning exercise on research careers, concluded in 2025 with 16 participating countries, addressed precisely this level and formulated recommendations for national reforms implementing the Council Recommendation. The projects can analyse, pilot and prepare such changes, but they have neither the funding nor the mandate to carry them out; their results are most likely to have an effect where they connect with such national reforms.

Several messages for institutions and policy makers follow from the discussion:

- **Career support as a core institutional service.** Only a minority of doctoral graduates and postdocs can obtain permanent academic positions. Much of the projects' work therefore aims to support the others in developing careers outside academia and connecting with other employers, so that temporary positions do not turn into a long sequence of fixed-term contracts. Career guidance and related services are currently often project-funded. A key outcome of the pilots would be that institutions and policy makers recognise such services as part of the core-funded services of research organisations, delivered by permanent units rather than ad hoc. Whether institutions draw this conclusion, and how it can be financed, remains open at this early stage.
- **Clear ownership.** Responsibility for researchers' careers is spread across doctoral schools, supervisors, HR departments and leadership. Making career development a matter for HR and top management, not only for doctoral schools or individual supervisors, is seen as decisive. Supervisors and mentors play a key role but are rarely trained, supported or given

recognised time for it; the reform of research assessment (CoARA) offers a lever to change this.

- **Flexibility in funding.** Member States could enable institutions to combine funding from different channels to offer more stable perspectives to early-career researchers. Projects proposed structured mobility incentives and dual affiliation between academia and industry as concrete options.
- **Coherence with other reforms.** Career support needs to be linked to the reform of research assessment (CoARA) and to the HR Excellence in Research Award. The Commission underlined that implementing the Charter is an investment with returns for institutions, not only a cost.
- **Measuring outcomes, not plans.** Indicators should capture actual career outcomes. Potential indicators named include time to reintegration into academia after experience in other sectors, retention after reintegration, use of career services, and recognition of external experience in academic assessment.

Online participants asked what prevents local industry–academia pipelines from scaling across borders. The discussions at the event pointed to several barriers rather than a single one: differences in national frameworks, for example for industrial doctorates and the status of doctoral candidates; limited mutual recognition of researchers' competences and credentials across countries; and the portability of social security and pensions for mobile researchers, which RESAVER addresses for pensions.

These messages do not imply that project funding should be replaced by core funding. Projects such as the Talent Ecosystems pilots allow organisations to test new approaches. The question is how successful pilots can be taken over into regular institutional practice once projects end. One way to support this, as suggested by the Commission, would be to present the projects' results regularly at meetings of the ERA Structural Policy Group on research careers. A regular exchange of this kind would allow the group to draw on the projects' evidence, and the projects to align with the structural policy.

## 3.4. Recognising entrepreneurial and intersectoral experience

A specific and concrete issue concerns mobility from the private sector into academia, for instance of researchers who leave academia to found a company. If their start-up fails, they often cannot return to a research position, because entrepreneurial experience is not recognised in academic recruitment and assessment. In some academic cultures, a failed venture may even count against a candidate rather than being seen as valuable experience. This discourages entrepreneurial careers. It also weakens a key bridge between research and

industry: researcher-founded companies are a way in which industry grows out of research organisations themselves, and they can become long-term partners of an ecosystem.

Returning founders would also bring back valuable experience. Intersectoral mobility today is largely a one-way path from academia to industry; making it possible for founders to return would strengthen the much rarer movement in the other direction. Returning founders know what it takes to bring research to the market, and why ventures fail – including the standard pitfalls that others could avoid. They also know the regional innovation ecosystem first-hand: investors, funders, support organisations, public authorities and potential partners. This is exactly the kind of commercialisation knowledge and intersectoral experience the Talent Ecosystems call seeks to foster. Returning founders could contribute to entrepreneurship and transversal skills training in doctoral programmes, and act as a source of advice and contacts not only for doctoral candidates and students, but also for colleagues considering commercialisation or collaboration with industry.

A safety net for returning founders, and the recognition of applied outputs such as patents, prototypes and spin-offs in academic careers, would therefore support talent ecosystems in the long term. Participants also stressed that entrepreneurship training – which addresses competences related to innovation and entrepreneurship that are also part of ResearchComp – needs to be combined with practical exposure and with teachers who have experience in companies, a role returning founders are well placed to fill.

Online participants raised the same issue from the researcher's perspective: how can two years in an ecosystem avoid being "career suicide" for a researcher returning to academia, where high-impact publications still dominate assessment? The Commission pointed to the reform of research assessment and to the activities of CoARA, DORA and FOLEC. Participants also asked how recognition of non-traditional and cross-sector careers could be made consistent across Member States. The Council Recommendation and the European Charter for Researchers call for valuing non-linear careers; how far recognition can be harmonised across national systems is a question for the ERA structural policy on research careers and the planned ERA Act.

## 3.5. Platforms, scalability and the ERA Talent Platform

Eight of the ten projects – all except SECURE2 and SMART Researchers – are developing a digital platform. Of all the mechanisms the projects use, platforms are the most scalable by nature. Once developed, they can serve additional users, institutions and countries at low additional cost, and they are not tied to a particular location. This makes them an obvious vehicle for extending pilot results across the ERA, and for keeping them alive after projects end.

The same feature raises the question of coordination. If each project scales its own platform, they may end up competing for the same users rather than complementing each other. Participants were concerned about a "graveyard of platforms" – tools built with EU funding that fall out of use once projects end. Connecting project platforms to the ERA Talent Platform and to EURAXESS, which the FORESEE project (see Section 1.2) is currently reorganising, is one part of the answer.

At the same time, a single European platform may not reach all target groups. SMEs, for example, are often reached more easily through regional channels and intermediaries. A variety of platforms that are connected and interoperable rather than isolated may serve different audiences best. How such a landscape is best designed – which functions belong at European level and which closer to regional ecosystems – and how platforms can maximise their reach among private employers, are open questions for the coming phase. The 2027 call topic already asks future projects to build on, connect to and complement the ERA Talent Platform initiatives.

ResearchComp is a related issue. Employers value it once it is explained, but they ask for clearer, more actionable language. Projects suggested integrating ResearchComp into talent-matching platforms, so that employers can describe their needs in the same terms, and adding market-related competences such as IP literacy. Organisations can and should use ResearchComp flexibly, selecting and emphasising the competences that matter for their researchers and context. What projects cautioned against is different: each project redefining or relabelling the competences themselves. That would leave employers and researchers facing several incompatible versions, and reduce the framework's value as a common language. Box 2 summarises questions raised by online participants that call for future policy consideration.

**Box 2 – Questions for future policy consideration**

Online participants raised several questions that go beyond what the projects can address. They point to issues for future policy work:

- **Scaling industry–academia pipelines across borders:** differences in national frameworks, limited mutual recognition of competences and credentials, and the portability of social security and pensions (Section 3.3).
- **Consistent recognition of non-traditional careers across Member States:** how far recognition can be harmonised across national systems, building on the reform of research assessment (Section 3.4).
- **The return on research assessment reform:** making its benefits visible, and engaging industry in recognising researchers' transversal skills (Section 3.6).
- **International talent**: access to career development and recognition of prior learning for researchers coming to the EU from elsewhere.

## 3.6. Conclusions

- **Known issues, confirmed from the ground**. Uncertain career progression, fragmented and project-dependent support, the gap between formal commitment and practice, and limited intersectoral mobility reappear across projects; skills training is in high demand but rarely rewarded in career progression. The evidence is not representative, but it shows how these issues play out within organisations – and helps trigger change there.
- **Careers cannot be shaped at project level alone.** Career stability, funding of positions and assessment criteria rest with institutions, funders and national legislation. The projects can analyse, pilot and prepare changes; their effect depends on how far these are taken up by those who decide.
- **From pilot to core service.** Lasting impact depends on organisations taking ownership of what the projects pilot – career services, action plans, training – and integrating it into their regular activities as standard tasks, owned by HR and top management and financed from core budgets rather than projects.
- **Recognising entrepreneurial experience.** Founders whose start-up fails should be able to return to academia. They bring commercialisation know-how and ecosystem contacts that benefit doctoral training and colleagues alike.
- **Platforms: scalable, but in need of coordination.** The Commission could, together with the projects and FORESEE, map the platforms developed in the projects and agree how they link to the ERA Talent Platform and EURAXESS – for example through common interfaces, transfer of content or hosting after project end. This would help avoid a graveyard of platforms and tools once projects end. Regional platforms may still be needed to reach SMEs.
- **Questions for further evidence.** Several issues cannot yet be answered at this early stage.
    - which governance and financing models can sustain career services once project funding ends;
    - whether ResearchComp-based micro-credentials are portable across institutions and countries and recognised by employers;
    - which changes in assessment and employment conditions have lasting effects on career stability and mobility;
    - how the growing number of PhD graduates relates to demand for researchers, given flat business R&D investment;

- what return the reform of research assessment brings for institutions and researchers, and how industry can be engaged in recognising researchers' transversal skills.

Following researchers' careers over time, rather than reporting on the completion of action plans, would help answer these questions.

## 3.7. Recommendations by target group

The recommendations below are grouped by target group. Within each group, they follow the same sequence of themes, indicated by a label at the start of each recommendation. The sequence runs from the strategic frame to the substance, and then to how results are anchored and with which tools. It starts with **Coordination** (call design and cooperation across projects and policy levels) and **Evidence** (baselines, indicators and monitoring). It continues with **Careers** (recognition, working conditions and career support) and **Companies** (links with research-employing firms and other non-academic employers), followed by **Ownership** (anchoring results in organisations and their regular funding) and **Tools** (platforms, diagnostic instruments and other tools). Not every theme applies to every group.

**For the current Talent Ecosystems projects**

- **Evidence.** When repeating surveys or assessments at the end of the project, align a few core questions across projects, so that change can be compared across the portfolio – and coordinate remaining surveys and events to limit stakeholder fatigue. Report results as career outcomes – uptake of services, transitions between sectors, returns to academia – not only as the completion of plans.
- **Companies.** Strengthen the involvement of research-performing companies in the implementation phase, through technology transfer offices, clusters and companies' own sector events, with concrete roles in training, placements and mentoring.
- **Ownership.** Use the remaining project period to secure formal adoption of action plans and career services by the governing bodies of participating organisations, and to agree how they will be financed after the project ends.
- **Tools.** Connect platforms to the ERA Talent Platform and EURAXESS before they are finalised, in dialogue with FORESEE, and decide who will maintain them after the project. Make tools and methods openly available, and prepare to share them with projects funded under the 2027 call, as foreseen in the call topic.

**For research organisations and other training providers**

- **Careers.** Support doctoral graduates and postdocs who will not obtain permanent academic positions in developing careers in other sectors.
- **Careers.** Recognise intersectoral and entrepreneurial experience, including from failed start-ups, in recruitment and assessment.
- **Careers.** Train, support and recognise supervisors and mentors for their role in researchers' careers.
- **Careers.** Use ResearchComp flexibly for training and self-assessment, while keeping its common definitions and translating them into language employers understand.
- **Companies.** Link career services with technology transfer offices, which already have relationships with companies and spin-offs.
- **Ownership.** Treat career support as a core service, delivered by a permanent unit with clear ownership by HR and top management rather than through projects alone.

**For national governments and research funders**

- **Careers.** Enable institutions to combine funding from different channels to offer more stable perspectives to early-career researchers. Concrete options proposed at the event include structured mobility incentives, such as funded secondments that allow researchers to spend time in a company while keeping their academic position, and dual affiliation, where researchers hold positions in a university and a company at the same time.
- **Careers.** Support recognition of applied outputs and entrepreneurial experience in academic careers, in line with the reform of research assessment.
- **Careers.** Build on the recommendations of the mutual learning exercise on research careers when implementing the Council Recommendation.
- **Companies.** Where industrial doctorates are legally possible but rarely used, put in place what is needed to make them work in practice – implementing rules, funding schemes and standard arrangements between universities and companies on supervision, employment and intellectual property.
- **Ownership.** Make it possible – depending on the national funding system – for institutional base funding of universities and research organisations to cover the support functions that talent ecosystems rely on: career services, technology transfer offices, research management and support for researcher start-ups. Services piloted in projects can then be continued as regular institutional tasks.

- **Ownership.** More generally, use base funding and its steering instruments, such as performance agreements where they exist, to support the take-over of successful project results into regular institutional practice, while keeping project funding for testing new approaches.

**For European policymakers**

- **Coordination.** Establish a regular exchange between the projects and the ERA Structural Policy Group on research careers.
- **Coordination.** In future calls, decide on the emphasis (links between research organisations and employers, or research careers more broadly) and on geography (regional or transnational ecosystems), and state explicitly what projects of this type can achieve.
- **Coordination.** Build coordination between funded projects into future calls from the kick-off, including common baseline instruments, and make clear that adapting and transferring existing results counts as a genuine contribution.
- **Evidence.** Support longitudinal evidence on career outcomes, building on the Research and Innovation Careers Observatory.
- **Tools.** Together with the projects and FORESEE, map the platforms developed by the projects and agree how they link to the ERA Talent Platform and EURAXESS.

**For applicants to future calls (see also Section 4.3)**

- **Evidence.** Set objectives that are realistic for a coordination and support action, and measure progress against a baseline using career-outcome indicators.
- **Careers.** Address working conditions and precarity through organisational measures – contract policies, transparent remuneration and progression criteria, more stable career paths, well-being.
- **Companies.** Involve research-performing companies with concrete roles – for example through technology transfer offices, clusters, European Technology Platforms or the industry associations behind Horizon Europe partnerships – and meet them at their own sector events.
- **Companies.** Identify, together with companies in the chosen thematic area, the skills researchers need at the interface with that sector, and develop training on them.
- **Companies.** Link career services with technology transfer offices and research managers.
- **Ownership.** Co-create with the wider ecosystem from the start, secure ownership by top management, HR and researcher representatives, and tailor actions to each organisation’s maturity.

- **Ownership.** Explain where and how the ecosystem is built and which organisations anchor it, whether the consortium is regional or transnational.
- **Ownership.** Use the HR Excellence in Research Award process as a framework for organisational change, not only as a formal requirement.
- **Ownership.** Plan sustainability from the start: formal adoption by governing bodies and early thinking about financing.
- **Tools.** Build on and adapt the pilots' results, stating what is taken over and what is added; cooperate also with other initiatives on research talent, such as MSCA, Erasmus+ and knowledge valorisation projects.
- **Tools.** Reuse existing diagnostic instruments, including the HR Excellence in Research Award gap analysis, and join a common core of baseline questions.
- **Tools.** Develop a platform only where it adds to existing ones, and show how it connects to the ERA Talent Platform and who maintains it.

# 4. Increasing the impact of future grants

## 4.1. Introduction

The third session of the event discussed how future Talent Ecosystems grants could build on the experience of the pilots. This chapter first reflects on what talent ecosystems are expected to achieve and on two strategic choices for future calls: whether to target intersectoral mobility specifically or research careers more broadly, and whether to favour regional ecosystems or transnational consortia. It then summarises the lessons in the form of potential content for frequently asked questions, as input to guidance for applicants to the 2027 call. The 2027 call topic already takes up several points raised by the pilots, notably through a choice of thematic areas, a balanced composition of training providers and employers, and structured cooperation with and/or building on the ten pilot projects and with ERA Talent Platform initiatives.

## 4.2. What should talent ecosystems achieve?

The keynote at the event described a mature regional talent ecosystem: a research group at KU Leuven embedded in Flanders Make and in the wider Flemish innovation system (Box 3). It is not a project but an ecosystem built over decades, and it is not presented here as a yardstick for the pilots. Rather, it illustrates the kind of long-term outcome that the call topics describe, and to which projects can contribute building blocks. Its main features are:

- a research-intensive university as anchor;
- universities of applied sciences that provide proximity to SMEs;
- dedicated staff for valorisation and technology transfer;
- a high share of “dual-desk” industrial doctorates, split between university and company;
- ways of embedding research relevance for companies without compromising academic freedom – such as involving companies in strategic dialogue on long-term research directions, jointly supervised industrial doctorates, and shared, realistic expectations of what research can deliver – with each partner keeping its own identity;
- researchers moving into companies as an important channel of knowledge transfer;
- spin-offs that draw larger firms into the ecosystem.

It is place-based, built over many years, and rests on recurrent structural funding. The pilot projects contribute to such ecosystems in two ways. Some of their work targets intersectoral talent flows directly, through placements, matching, training in transversal and entrepreneurial skills, and partnerships with employers. Much of their work contributes more indirectly. Organisational change in line with the Charter, career services and more stable career paths – such as tenure-track-like models – make research organisations, including universities, more attractive to talent. Stronger research organisations in turn enrich the ecosystem around them. Both contributions are valuable, but they differ in how directly and how quickly they produce intersectoral mobility. This raises two strategic questions for future calls.

**The first concerns emphasis.** A talent ecosystem in the sense of the call includes both attractive careers within research organisations and cooperation between the organisations that train researchers and those that employ them. Future calls could put the emphasis on the second element – the links between research organisations and employers: transversal skills, exchanges with employers, industrial doctorates, involvement of technology transfer offices and career services oriented to non-academic careers. Alternatively, they could keep a broader approach that gives equal weight to the general attractiveness of research careers, including academic careers. The 2027 call topic moves towards the first option, with its thematic areas and its example of a cluster of companies cooperating with academic institutions. At the same time, it retains organisational change in line with the Charter as a central element.

**The second strategic question concerns geography.** Future calls could favour regional ecosystems, built around one place with a critical mass of academic and non-academic partners. Alternatively, they could continue with transnational consortia, in which each partner develops its own local ecosystem and the consortium serves mutual learning and transfer. Each option has advantages:

- Regional ecosystems allow depth, trust and closeness to SMEs. They also connect naturally to regional innovation strategies and smart specialisation efforts.
- Transnational consortia spread approaches across countries, including Widening countries, and allow comparison and learning between different contexts.
- Multiregional designs such as BREATH's, which link several regional ecosystems, combine elements of both.

The choice between these options is for the call authorities to make. Whichever direction is chosen, future calls could state explicitly what projects of this size and type can achieve on their own, and where they depend on decisions by institutions, funders and national policy. This would help applicants set realistic objectives and make the link between projects and structural reforms visible.

Table 3 summarises the main changes between the pilot call and the 2027 call; several of them – the thematic focus, the role of companies in training, the emphasis on complementarity with existing initiatives and on cooperation between projects – address issues also raised by the pilots.

**Table 3 – From the pilot call (2024) to the 2027 call**

| | Pilot call 2024 (HORIZON-WIDERA-2024-ERA-02-03) | Call 2027 (HORIZON-WIDERA-2027-05-ERA-02) |
|---|---|---|
| **Budget** | €20 million for ten projects | €29 million, around €2 million per project |
| **Policy frame** | Pilot under ERA Action 4, testing principles for a future investment strategy and providing policy feedback | Contribution to the ERA structural policy on attractive and sustainable research careers |
| **Thematic focus** | Optional: thematic (e.g. climate, pharma, automotive) or comprehensive | Mandatory choice of one of five areas: clean transition, health, biotech and bioeconomy, digital and AI, space |
| **Consortium** | Training providers and employers of researchers | Balanced composition of training providers and employers, especially non-academic; associated partners and cooperation beyond the consortium encouraged; example of a cluster of companies cooperating with academic institutions |
| **Role of companies** | Involvement of the non-academic sector in training | Involvement in the design and implementation of training, according to the needs of businesses and the labour market |
| **Target groups** | Early-career researchers | Researchers and other R&I staff, including well-being, incoming mobile researchers, international talent and diaspora scientists |
| **Coordination** | — | Build on, connect to and avoid duplicating ERA Talent Platform initiatives; structured cooperation with the pilot projects and among new projects |
| **Sustainability** | — | Ecosystems designed to last beyond the project |
| **Unchanged** | Coordination and support actions of up to three years; no funding of salaries or mobility of individual researchers; HR Excellence in Research Award held or committed to | |

*Source:* call topic texts in the Horizon Europe Work Programmes 2023–2024 and 2026–2027.

Most of the event's lessons are reflected in the 2027 call text. Several points, however, are not explicit in it. While the text itself is final, these points could inform guidance for applicants, briefings for evaluators and the design of future work programmes, and applicants can already take them up:

- **Technology transfer offices** as a link to companies, spin-offs and regional actors – RM Comp is mentioned, but technology transfer offices are not.
- **Recognition of intersectoral and entrepreneurial experience** in academic assessment, including for returning founders – the call speaks of multidirectional talent circulation, but not of assessment.

- **Start-ups and spin-offs** as ecosystem partners, not only as a career destination.
- **How results last** – the call asks for ecosystems designed to last beyond the project; the event pointed to formal adoption, integration into regular activities and core funding as the means.
- **Monitoring of career outcomes** with comparable baselines – policy feedback remains part of all ERA-related projects, for example through a policy brief as a deliverable, and would gain from such comparable evidence.
- **Concrete intersectoral formats** such as industrial doctorates, secondments and dual affiliation.
- **Regional anchoring** – links to regional innovation strategies and authorities.

A further lesson concerns the portfolio as a whole. Because consortia are selected independently, coordination between projects can only start once they are funded. Future calls could therefore build in coordination from the start – for example a joint kick-off of all funded projects, agreement on a small set of common baseline instruments, and coordinated data collection to limit stakeholder fatigue – in addition to the structured cooperation with the pilot projects that the 2027 call topic already foresees.

**Box 3 – A mature regional talent ecosystem as benchmark: Flanders Make at KU Leuven**

The keynote showed what an operational talent ecosystem looks like after years of build-up. The KU Leuven mechatronic system dynamics group (108 PhD researchers, including 29 industrial PhD candidates) is embedded in three reinforcing layers: the Flemish Industrial Research Fund, which finances dedicated valorisation staff; the KU Leuven Association, whose universities of applied sciences give proximity to manufacturing SMEs that would not approach a university themselves; and Flanders Make, through which Flemish universities and an RTO component jointly serve industry at higher technology-readiness levels.

People were described as the most effective knowledge-transfer channel, and spin-offs as bridges – a multinational became a partner after acquiring a spin-off from the group. Success factors named were a joint long-term vision, trust embedded in organisations rather than individuals, top-management involvement, respect for each partner's "DNA", critical mass to absorb shocks, clear up-front IP agreements, and continuous communication.

This ecosystem has developed over many years; it is place-based, anchored in a research-intensive university with long-standing industry links, and rests on recurrent structural funding.

## 4.3. Event-based suggestions for future applicants

The suggestions below draw on the experience of the pilots and on the discussions at the event, including questions submitted by the online audience.

*Answers on eligibility and funding rules are based on the 2027 call topic in the Work Programme 2026–2027; applicants should always refer to the official call documents.*

**Can we build on results of the pilot projects, or will this be seen as lacking novelty?** Building on existing results is expected. The call topic asks for structured cooperation with the pilot projects. Adapting tools and approaches developed by the pilots to new institutions, sectors or countries, and testing whether they work there, is a genuine contribution. The Commission confirmed at the event that the Work Programme 2026–2027 supports implementing existing tools and structures in new ecosystems, rather than expecting new EU-wide tools where good ones exist. Cooperation can extend beyond Talent Ecosystems projects to other initiatives on research talent, such as MSCA, Erasmus+ and knowledge valorisation projects. Proposals should make clear what they take over, from which project, and what they add or adapt. Table 2 and Annex Table A1 give an overview of the instruments used by the pilots and where they are documented.

**What kind of activities can be funded?** The action supports organisational change, services and cooperation, not salaries or mobility of individual researchers. Typical activities include:

- diagnosing gaps and developing action plans in line with the Charter;
- improving working conditions and reducing precarity through organisational measures, such as contract policies, transparent remuneration and progression criteria, models for more stable career paths (e.g. tenure-track-like positions) and attention to well-being;
- setting up career development and mentoring services;
- training based on ResearchComp and RM Comp, designed together with non-academic organisations – ResearchComp also covers competences such as science-to-policy translation and public engagement, which are rarely rewarded in academic careers;
- building partnerships between the organisations of the ecosystem.

Projects cannot fund researchers' salaries, but they can analyse remuneration, working conditions and career structures and prepare changes that organisations and policy makers then implement. Table 2 shows how the pilots have combined such activities.

**What is the role of the HR Excellence in Research Award?** According to the call topic, participating organisations should hold the award or commit to start the process within the grant duration, as far as relevant for their employment of researchers. The award is more than a formal requirement. Its process – an internal gap analysis against the principles of the European Charter for Researchers, followed by an action plan and periodic review – provides a ready-

made framework for the organisational change that talent ecosystem projects aim at. The pilots show how it can be used: ARCOE supports the award application process in 15 organisations, and CROSS has built an HR Excellence in Research Repository of practical guidance. For non-academic employers, for whom the award is less suited, INSIGHT is developing a tool to assess their readiness to employ researchers in line with the Charter.

**How should we involve companies?** Research-performing companies – potential employers of researchers – are central to a talent ecosystem, but account for less than a tenth of participations in the pilot projects. The call topic asks for a balanced composition of training providers and employers, especially from the non-academic sector, and encourages associated partners. The pilots' experience suggests the following:

- Reach research-intensive companies through existing links – for example through technology transfer offices, which usually have relationships with companies from collaborative research and licensing and with their organisation's spin-offs, or through clusters, European Technology Platforms and the industry associations involved in Horizon Europe partnerships and joint undertakings.
- Involve research-intensive businesses and clusters from the design stage of training and career development systems.
- Give them concrete roles with adequate budget, such as co-designing training, hosting placements, mentoring or taking part in challenges.
- Use the chosen thematic area to identify, together with companies, the skills researchers need at the interface with that sector – such as regulatory requirements in health, or standards and scale-up processes in manufacturing and energy – and develop training on them.
- Present the offer in their language, focused on what researchers can do – for example by linking ResearchComp to ESCO, the EU's classification of skills and occupations – and let companies experience researchers' adaptability through placements, challenges and joint projects, as companies often underestimate it.
- Meet companies at their own sector events, rather than expecting them to come to academic ones.
- Reach the right people in companies, including HR staff, who were often hard to identify.

Not every company needs to be a full partner: advisory roles, alumni networks and cooperation through clusters can also work well.

**Should we involve technology transfer offices and research managers?** Involving the technology transfer office of a participating organisation is one possible model among several for linking a talent ecosystem with companies.

Technology transfer offices and career services both connect researchers with the non-academic world, but they are rarely linked to each other. Technology transfer offices often already have the company contacts that career services lack – through collaborative research, licensing and spin-offs – and know the regional ecosystem actors. Other models work as well: companies as full or associated partners, clusters and other intermediaries, or cooperation through specific activities such as challenges and placements (see Section 2.2). Whichever model is chosen, involving research managers can strengthen the links; the call topic refers to the competence framework for research managers (RM Comp).

**How can we make sure that time spent outside academia does not harm a researcher's academic career?** Through the recognition of intersectoral and entrepreneurial experience in recruitment and assessment. Participating organisations can commit to this in their own procedures, in line with the reform of research assessment; the Commission pointed to the activities of CoARA, DORA and FOLEC.

**How do we engage stakeholders effectively?** The pilots point to three factors:

- Co-creation with the wider ecosystem from the start: involving companies, clusters, public authorities and researcher associations in the design, not only consulting them.
- Ownership within organisations: top management, HR departments and researcher representatives involved in developing and formally adopting action plans.
- Tailoring to the maturity of each organisation.

Stakeholders are often asked to take part in many surveys and events. Coordinating data collection with other projects can reduce this fatigue.

**Do we need to carry out our own baseline survey?** Diagnosis is a valuable starting point, and it helps to trigger change within organisations. Existing instruments can often be reused, such as the gap analysis that organisations carry out as part of the HR Excellence in Research Award process, maturity mappings, ResearchComp-based gap analyses and the ResearchComp self-assessment tool, along with the pilots' published evidence. Projects could also agree on a small common core of questions to be included in all their baseline surveys – for example on researchers' career prospects, the support they receive, awareness of the Charter and experience outside academia. Such a core could be agreed at a joint kick-off of the funded projects, with one project or REA coordinating it. Asked in the same way everywhere, these questions would make results comparable across projects and allow changes to be followed over time, while each project remains free to add its own questions.

**Should we develop a digital platform?** Only where it adds something that existing platforms do not offer. The call topic asks projects to build on and complement the ERA Talent Platform, EURAXESS, RESAVER, ReICO,

ResearchComp and RM Comp, and to avoid duplication. Proposals should explain how a platform connects to these, which users it reaches – for example SMEs at regional level – and who will maintain it after the project.

**Should our consortium be regional or transnational?** Both are possible under the call topic. Whichever model is chosen, proposals should explain where and how the ecosystem is actually built, which organisations anchor it, and how cooperation between them will continue after the project.

**How should we deal with differences between disciplines – should we focus on a narrower field?** Academic career structures are broadly similar across disciplines; what differs is the specialised knowledge and related training needs, and the range of career options outside academia. A narrower focus, such as one of the thematic areas of the 2027 call topic, makes it easier to tailor training and to build links with the employers concerned. Organisational measures such as career services and the implementation of the Charter, by contrast, can usually serve researchers across disciplines.

**How do we make results last beyond the project?** The pilots' experience suggests:

- anchoring services in existing structures, such as permanent units or European university alliances;
- having action plans formally adopted by the governing bodies of the organisations;
- planning early how services will be financed once project funding ends;
- connecting platforms and tools to European initiatives rather than running them in isolation.

**How can we keep companies engaged once EU funding ends?** Companies stay involved where cooperation serves their own needs: access to researchers with relevant skills, training they helped shape, and links to research through technology transfer offices and spin-offs. The Flanders Make example shows that cooperation lasts where it rests on a joint long-term vision and on trust embedded in organisations rather than individuals. For universities, keeping new practices – such as the recognition of intersectoral experience – depends on formally adopting them in institutional strategies and procedures during the project.

**How should we demonstrate impact?** Proposals should distinguish planned outputs from results. Where possible, they should use indicators on career outcomes, such as uptake of career services, placements, transitions between sectors and returns to academia, rather than the completion of plans alone. Setting objectives that are realistic for a coordination and support action, and showing where results depend on other actors or policies, strengthens credibility.

## 4.4. Conclusions

The pilots' experience offers lessons for future Talent Ecosystems grants at two levels:

- **Strategic choices for the call design.** Future calls need to decide whether to emphasise the links between research organisations and employers, or research careers more broadly. They also need to decide whether to favour regional ecosystems or transnational consortia in which each partner builds its own local ecosystem. The 2027 call topic already moves towards stronger links between research organisations and employers, organised by thematic area. Stating explicitly what projects of this type can achieve on their own would help applicants set realistic objectives.
- **Practical guidance for applicants.** Building on and adapting the pilots' results is a genuine contribution rather than a lack of novelty. Involving technology transfer offices, which know companies, start-ups and regional ecosystem actors, is one promising model among several; companies are best involved with concrete roles and in their own language. Platforms should connect to existing European initiatives rather than duplicate them. Sustainability needs to be planned from the start: results last only where organisations take ownership of them and integrate them into their regular activities, through formal adoption and early thinking about financing.

# 5. Annex

## 5.1. Additional material for the report

### Annex Table A1 – Sources for the classification of instruments in Table 2

| Project | Flagship mechanism (●) | Components (○) |
|---|---|---|
| **ARCOE** | ● **Digital platform:** Virtual Talent Innovation Ecosystem Hub to match, train and comply (MP 60; TR S2) | ● **Audit:** organisational assessment survey (WP 3.1.2; MP 88)<br>● **Needs analysis:** baseline survey of R1–R2 researchers and HR managers; interviews with HR managers and researchers (WP 3.1.2)<br>● **Charter/HRS4R:** HRS4R in 15 participant organisations (MP 60–61)<br>● **Recruitment criteria:** harmonised recruitment and career standards (MP 58)<br>● **Capacity building:** researchers trained (focus on the R1-R2 researchers(MP 61)<br>● **Modular training:** training delivered via the hub (MP 60)<br>● **Entrepreneurship/IP:** 350 researchers in deep-tech entrepreneurship, IP, pitching (MP 58)<br>● **ResearchComp:** competence mapping against ResearchComp and ESCO (WP 3.1.2)<br>● **Talent matching:** Meet&Match function (MP 61)<br>● **Networks:** long-term academia–industry networks (MP 58) |
| **AttractAdria** | ● **Audit:** review and gap analysis of practices and policies (MP 130; TR S3)<br>● **Organisational-change proposals:** HRS4R-aligned policy development and change proposals (MP 130; TR S3)<br>● **Career-support units:** Research Support Hubs in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia (MP 130; TR S3) | ● **Charter/HRS4R:** HRS4R-aligned reforms (MP 130–131; WP 3.1.6)<br>● **Guidance/mentoring:** mentorship network (MP 130–131)<br>● **Modular training:** training modules for R1–R4 (MP 130; WP 3.1.6)<br>● **Entrepreneurship/IP:** IP training (WP 3.1.6)<br>● **Digital platform:** SmartHub platform at M18 (MP 131)<br>● **Placements/mobility:** job shadowing, industrial and clinical training, new mobility mechanisms (MP 128, 130; WP 3.1.6)<br>● **Networks:** academia–hospital–industry collaboration (MP 128, 131) |
| **BREATH** | ● **Needs analysis:** Delphi study on skills gaps across career paths (MP 47; TR S1)<br>● **Partnership agreements:** one multiregional and three regional agreements (TR S1 panel; MP 48) | ● **Charter/HRS4R:** implementation of Charter pillar 4 (MP 48)<br>● **Career-support units:** strengthening career-guidance capacity of universities and employers (MP 45)<br>● **Guidance/mentoring:** tailored career guidance (MP 45; WP 3.1.9)<br>● **Capacity building:** capacity-building programme for talent managers (MP 48; REA overview)<br>● **Modular training:** modular training for health-innovation researchers (MP 48)<br>● **ResearchComp/micro-credentials:** intersectoral micro-credentials co-designed with non-academic actors (MP 48; TR S1)<br>● **Digital platform:** Career Path Guidance Platform (WP 3.1.9) |

| Project | Flagship mechanism (●) | Components (○) |
|---|---|---|
| **CROSS** | ● **Digital platform:** CROSS Platform (MP 126; TR S3)<br>● **HR Excellence in Research Repository** (MP 124, 127) | ● **Audit:** AI-driven institutional diagnostic engine within the CROSS Platform (MP 126)<br>● **Needs analysis:** 42 employer interviews, co-creation workshop (WP 3.1.5; MP 82)<br>● **Charter/HRS4R:** support for Charter adoption and HRS4R;<br>● **Roadmaps:** strategic roadmaps for RPOs generated by the diagnostic engine within the CROSS Platform (MP 126)<br>● **Guidance/mentoring:** roadmap for career counselling, mentoring handbook (CORDIS)<br>● **Capacity building:** ResearchComp Community of Practice (MP 127; TR S3)<br>● **Modular training:** pan-European transversal skills training database within the CROSS Platform (MP 126)<br>● **ResearchComp:** career development suite within the CROSS Platform - from self-assessment to career action (MP 126)<br>● **Networks:** intersectoral networks; four pilot ecosystems (MP 124; WP 3.1.5; TR S3) |
| **DeepTechSeeds** | ● **Digital platform:** digital matchmaking platform and centralised placement hub (MP 56; TR S2) | ● **Needs analysis:** survey of researchers and industry, focus groups, interviews (WP 3.1.1; MP 82)<br>● **Charter/HRS4R:** adapting the Charter to deep tech (MP 54; TR S2)<br>● **Recruitment criteria:** policy alignment blueprint, e.g. hiring scorecards (MP 56)<br>● **Guidance/mentoring:** peer-to-peer mentoring pathways (MP 56)<br>● **Entrepreneurship/IP:** 500 researchers in venture creation, IP, pitching (MP 54)<br>● **Talent matching:** matching events, Open Challenge hackathon (MP 57; TR S2)<br>● **Placements:** 10+ intersectoral placement schemes (MP 57)<br>● **Networks:** 10+ strategic academia–industry partnerships (MP 54) |
| **ECROS** | ● **Needs analysis:** multi-stage, multi-stakeholder analysis (TR S1 panel; WP 3.1.4)<br>● **Digital platform:** digital services platform for EUt+ (MP 39; TR S1) | ● **Roadmaps:** ECR framework at alliance level, adapted by each partner (TR S1 panel)<br>● **Career-support units:** integrated career development services across EUt+ (MP 37; TR S1)<br>● **Guidance/mentoring:** career guidance and cross-institutional mentoring (MP 37; MN)<br>● **Modular training:** transversal and industrial training catalogue (MP 40; TR S1)<br>● **Placements/mobility:** industrial placements; planned alliance-level industrial PhD (MP 37; TR S1 panel) |
| **INSIGHT** | ● **Charter/HRS4R:** plug-and-play implementation toolkit for companies and other employers (MP 64; TR S2)<br>● **Capacity building:** training of HR managers (MP 64; TR S2)<br>● **Modular training:** Training Pathways, an online knowledge hub (MP 64; TR S2) | ● **Audit:** organisational gap analysis on Charter implementation (WP 3.1.10; MP 97–98)<br>● **Guidance/mentoring:** mentoring and career support (MP 62)<br>● **Digital platform:** Training Pathways delivered as online hub (MP 64)<br>● **Networks:** five sectoral networks (MP 65; TR S2) |

| Project | Flagship mechanism (●) | Components (○) |
|---|---|---|
| **NextTechTalents** | ● **Modular training:** Training System, a modular competence-building platform (MP 68; TR S2) | ● **Needs analysis:** requirements engineering with interviews and stakeholder mapping (MP 68; WP 3.1.7)<br>● **Charter/HRS4R:** mainstreaming the Charter across organisations (MP 66)<br>● **Recruitment criteria:** requirements catalogue to modernise recruitment standards (MP 68)<br>● **Guidance/mentoring:** mentorship; persona-based career services (MP 66, 69)<br>● **Capacity building:** Implementation Handbook for HR managers and training providers (MP 68; WP 3.1.7)<br>● **Entrepreneurship:** transitions to non-academic careers incl. entrepreneurship (REA overview)<br>● **ResearchComp:** mainstreaming ResearchComp (MP 66)<br>● **Digital platform:** AI-supported knowledge engine (TR S2)<br>● **Networks:** letters of cooperation from 20 organisations; regional pilot facilitators (TR S2; MN) |
| **SECURE2** | ● **Audit:** institutional maturity mapping against the Research Career Framework (MP 43; TR S1)<br>● **Action plans:** selection of action areas and tailored action plans (MP 43; TR S1 panel)<br>● **Career-path models:** toolkit for tenure-track-like models (MP 43; TR S1 panel) | ● **Charter/HRS4R:** HRS4R training for pilots (MP 43)<br>● **Recruitment criteria:** policy briefs on recruitment; assessment action area of the framework (MP 43; WP 3.1.3)<br>● **Capacity building:** mutual learning process among pilots (MP 41; TR S1)<br>● **ResearchComp:** ResearchComp in the skills action area (MP 41; TR S1 Q&A) |
| **SMART Researchers** | ● **Audit:** institutional HR audit, seven maturity profiles (MP 35; TR S1)<br>● **Needs analysis:** ResearchComp-based survey of researchers and mentors (MP 35; TR S1)<br>● **Action plans:** seven strategic action plans 2026–2031 (MP 35; TR S1 panel)<br>● **Career-support units:** seven Career Support Centres (MP 35–36; TR S1)<br>● **ResearchComp/micro-credentials:** micro-credentialing and certification framework (MP 35; TR S1 panel) | ● **Charter/HRS4R:** scaling HR excellence in line with the Charter (MP 33)<br>● **Modular training:** modular learning units aligned with ResearchComp (MP 35) |

*Sources:* MP = slide number in the master presentation of the cluster event (29 September 2026); TR = event transcript (S1, S2, S3 = Sessions 1–3, including the project presentations; S1 panel = Session 1 discussion); WP = section of the cross-project white paper; MN = rapporteur's meeting notes; CORDIS / REA overview = online project descriptions.

## Getting in touch with the EU

### In person

All over the European Union there are hundreds of Europe Direct centres. You can find the address of the centre nearest you online (european-union.europa.eu/contact-eu/meet-us_en).

### On the phone or in writing

Europe Direct is a service that answers your questions about the European Union. You can contact this service:

- by freephone: 00 800 6 7 8 9 10 11 (certain operators may charge for these calls),
- at the following standard number: +32 22999696,
- via the following form: european-union.europa.eu/contact-eu/write-us_en.

## Finding information about the EU

### Online

Information about the European Union in all the official languages of the EU is available on the Europa website (european-union.europa.eu).

### EU publications

You can view or order EU publications at op.europa.eu/en/publications. Multiple copies of free publications can be obtained by contacting Europe Direct or your local documentation centre (european-union.europa.eu/contact-eu/meet-us_en).

### EU law and related documents

For access to legal information from the EU, including all EU law since 1951 in all the official language versions, go to EUR-Lex (eur-lex.europa.eu).

### EU open data

The portal data.europa.eu provides access to open datasets from the EU institutions, bodies and agencies. These can be downloaded and reused for free, for both commercial and non-commercial purposes. The portal also provides access to a wealth of datasets from European countries.

JW-01-26-022-EN-N



Publications Office
of the European Union