The European Research Council

The importance of doctoral education for the European knowledge society and the contribution of the ERC

Prof. Dirk INZE
Member of the ERC Scientific Council
2026 EUA-CDE THEMATIC WORKSHOP

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ERC is part of Horizon Europe

Pillar 1
Excellent Science

- European Research Council
- Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions
- Infrastructures

Pillar 2
Global Challenges and Industrial Competitiveness

Clusters
- Health
- Culture, creativity and inclusive society
- Civil Security for Society
- Digital, Industry and Space
- Climate, Energy and Mobility
- Food, Bioeconomy, Natural Resources, Agriculture and Environment

- Joint Research Centre

Pillar 3
Innovative Europe

- European Innovation Council
- European innovation ecosystems
- European Institute of Innovation and Technology

Widening participation and strengthening the European Research Area

- Widening Participation and Spreading Excellence
- Reforming and Enhancing the European R&I system

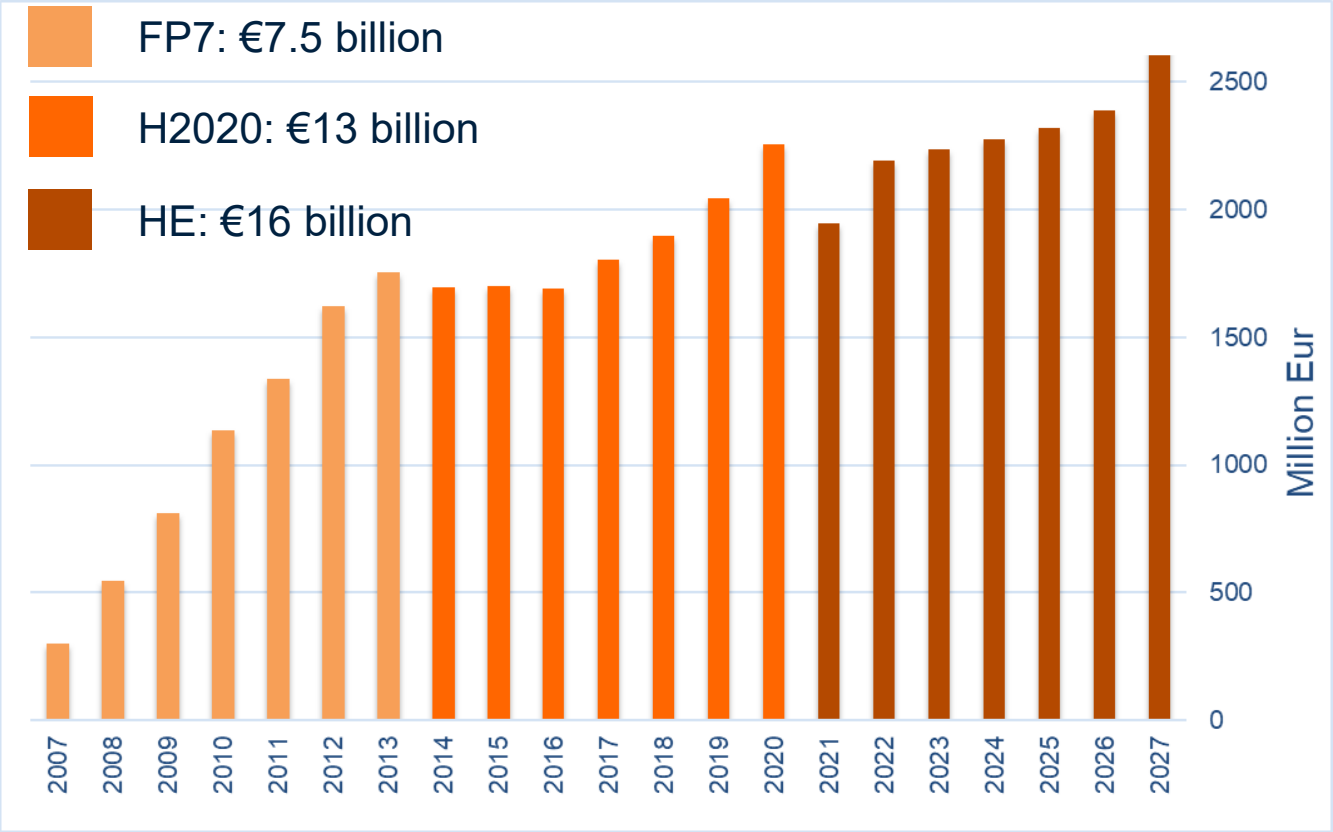
EUR 16 billion
ERC budget in Horizon Europe

17%
of the entire
Horizon Europe budget

ERC budget 2007 – 2027: EUR 36.5 billion

Proposal 2028-2034

EUR 41.5 billion for ERC + MSCA



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ERC Scientific Council

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Microbiology

Dirk Inzé
Plant Biology

Leszek Kaczmarek
Neurobiology

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Computer Science

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Sylvie Lorente
Mechnical Engineering

Björn Ottersten
Electrical Engineering

Tomaž Prosen
Physics

András Stipsicz
Mathematics

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ERC grant schemes

Starting Grants
Researchers (2-7 years after PhD)
up to €1.5 million for 5 years

Consolidator Grants
Researchers (7-12 years after PhD)
up to €2 million for 5 years

Advanced Grants
Researchers with track-record of significant research achievements up to €2.5 million for 5 years

Proof of Concept
bridging gap between research
- earliest stage of marketable innovation
lump sum €150 000 for ERC grantees

Synergy Grants
2-4 Principal investigators
up to €10 million for 6 years
1 PI can be based outside EU/Associated Countries

Plus Grants
Principal investigators at all career stages with a vision for transformative research
up to €7 million over 4-7 years

ERC in figures

Over **15,000**
top researchers funded since
the ERC creation in 2007

Over **120,000**
researchers and other professionals
employed in ERC research teams

Over **2,400**
patents and other IPR applications
generated by ERC funding

Over **400**
start-ups identified as founded
or co-founded by ERC grantees

Over **250,000**
articles from ERC projects published
in scientific journals

Over **950** research institutions hosting
ERC grantees – universities, public or
private research centres in the EU or
Associated Countries

93
nationalities of
grant holders

15 Nobel Prizes, **6** Fields Medals, **11** Wolf Prizes
and other prizes awarded to ERC grantees

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Choose Europe for Science – ERC Plus 2026

- 5 May ‘25: Initiative from European Commission to retain and attract researchers who want to advance their career in Europe

- **Increased** funding for researchers moving to Europe (from AdG2025 onward)
  - Researchers can request additional funding, when they relocate to Europe to take up ERC;
  - This funding is now increased from €1 million up to €2 million for StG, CoG, AdG

- New funding scheme: **ERC Plus Grant** (from WP2026 onward - amendment)
  - Up to EUR 7 million for up to 7 years (2026 call budget = € 210 million)
  - Stiff competition: only 30 ERC Plus grants for 2026
  - Lump sum funding
  - Both for researchers residing in EU/AC and for incoming researchers
  - Awarded purely on scientific excellence

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Changes for Starting and Consolidator in 2027

The eligibility period for both Starting and Consolidator Grant schemes will be widened:

- From 2027 on, researchers will be eligible to apply for a Starting Grant immediately after successfully defending their PhD, and at any time within the following ten-year period.
- Consolidator Grant applicants will be eligible to apply between five and fifteen years after defending their PhD.
- Researchers will be awarded no more than one Starting Grant and one Consolidator Grant during their career.
- The rules for the extension of the eligibility periods will remain in place.

Doctoral education and the ERC

ERC in figures

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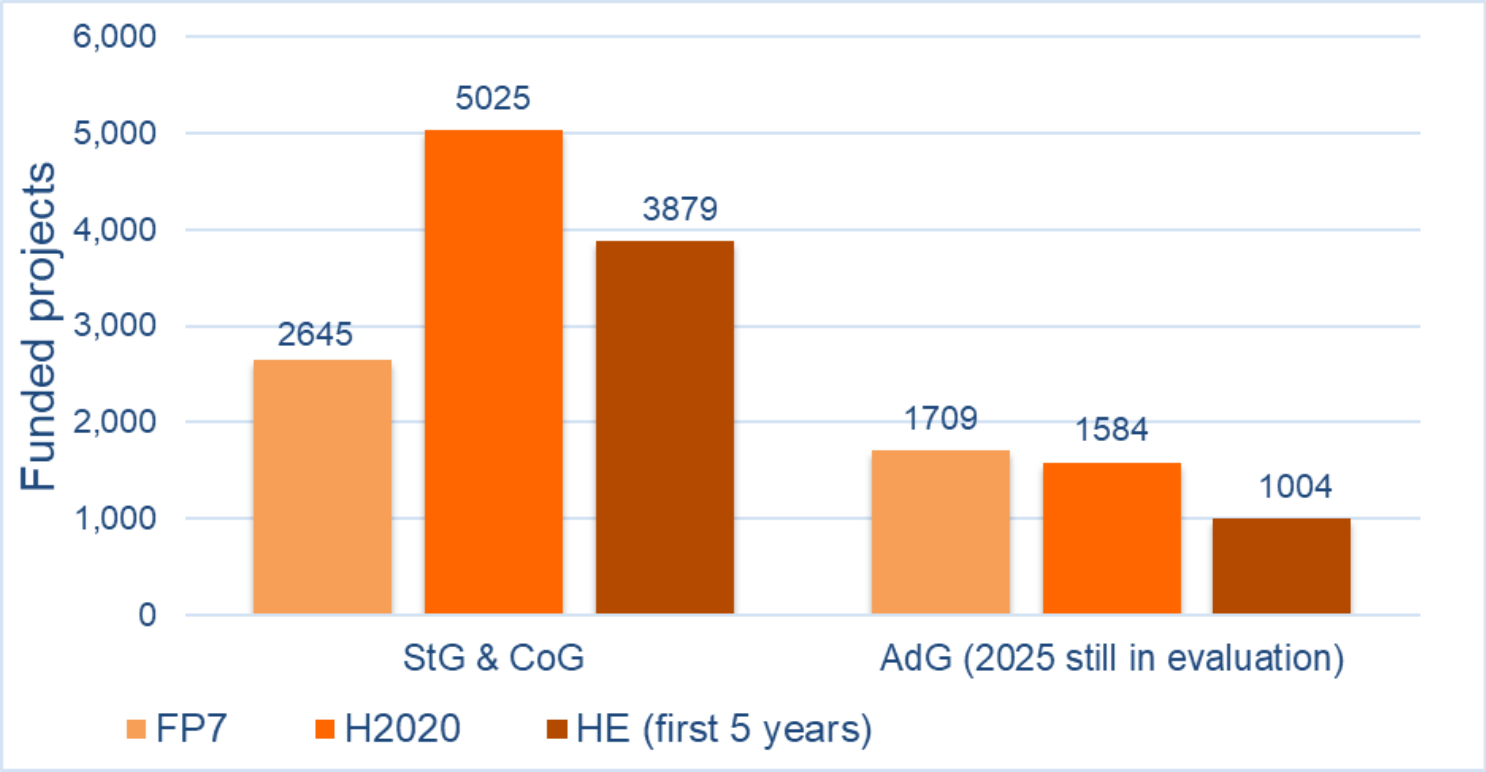
Two thirds of ERC grants awarded to early-stage researchers to start or consolidate their own independent research teams



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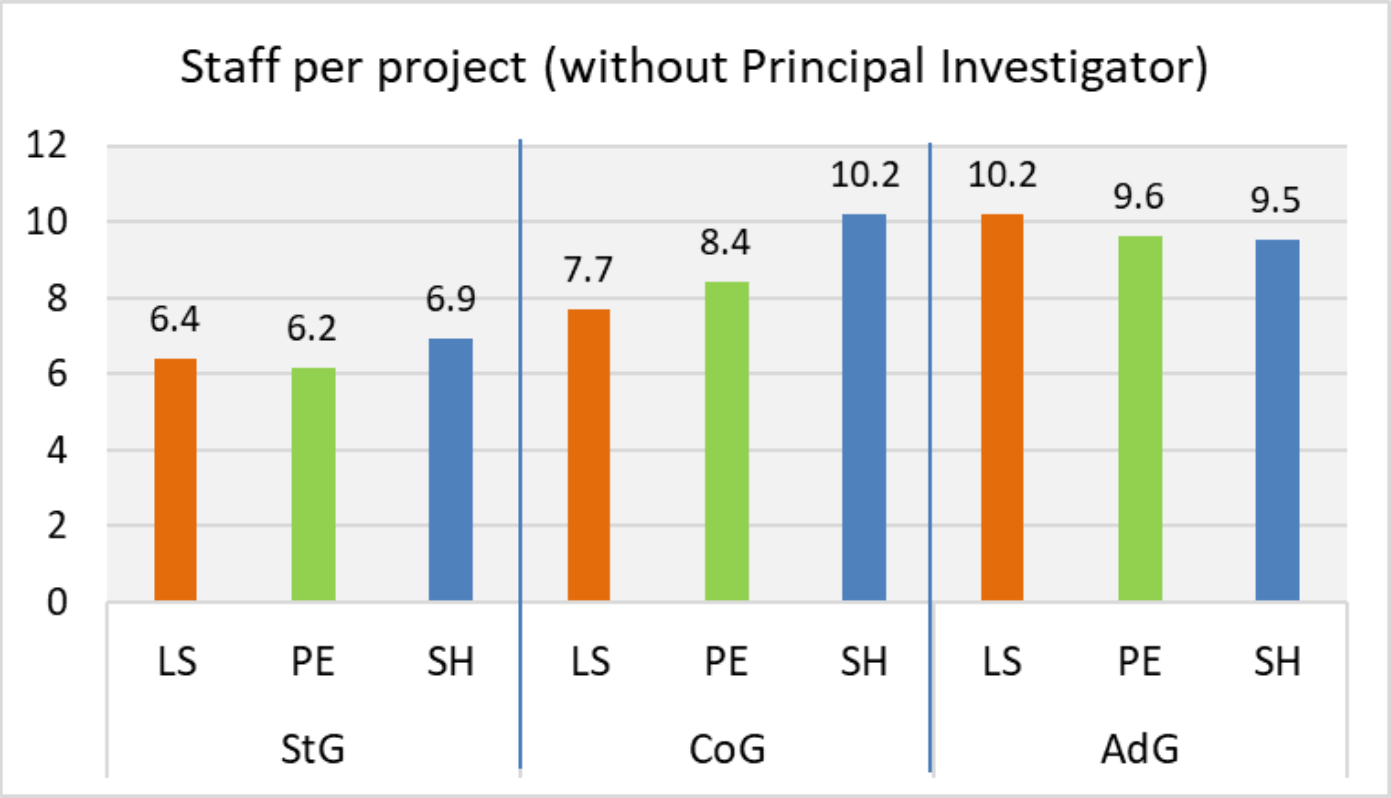
~ 120,000 researchers and other professionals employed in ERC research teams

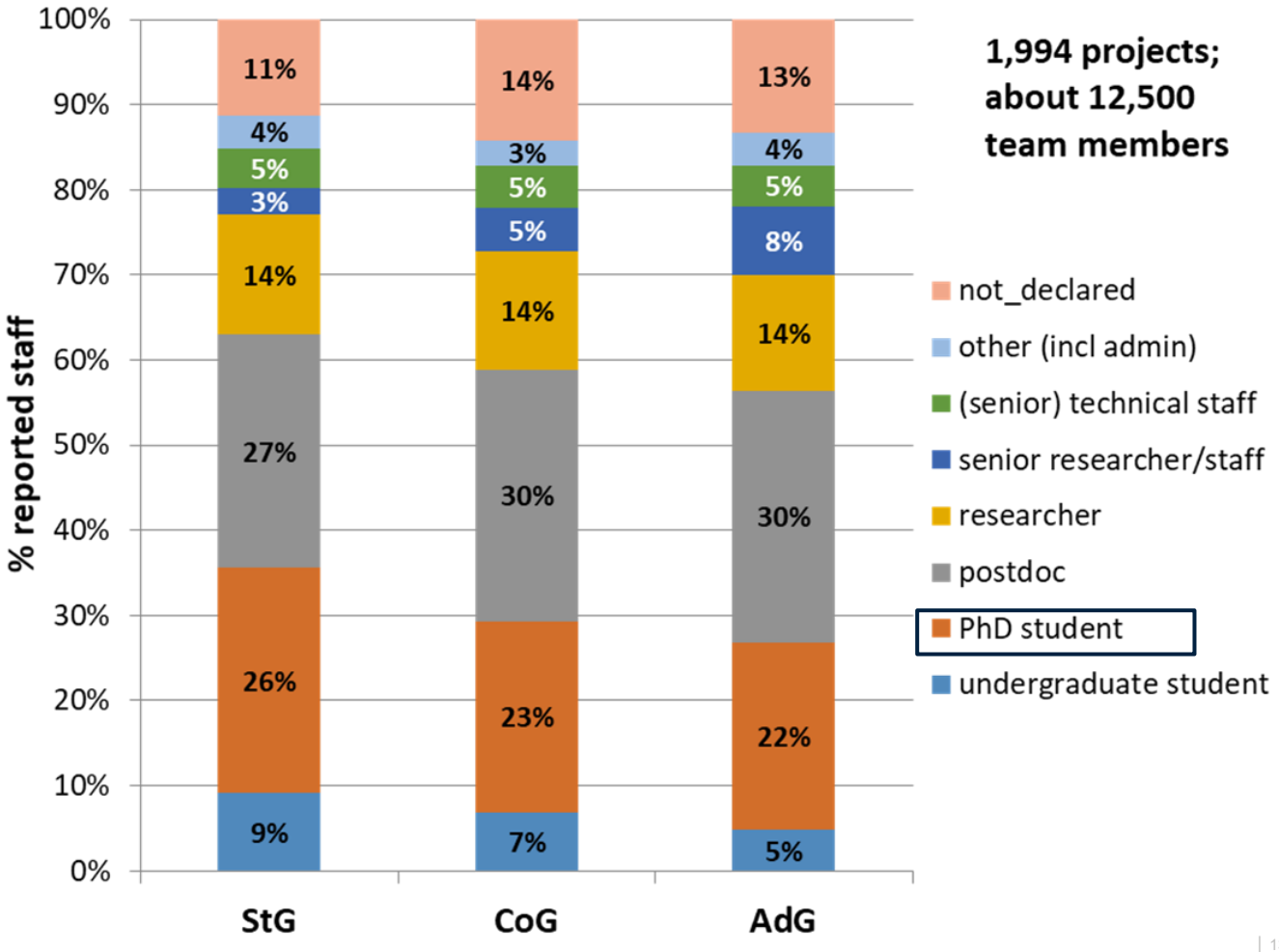


Estimation based on ~2,000 ERC H2020 reporting projects

~ 30,000 PhD students trained on ERC projects so far

25% of ERC team members are PhD students

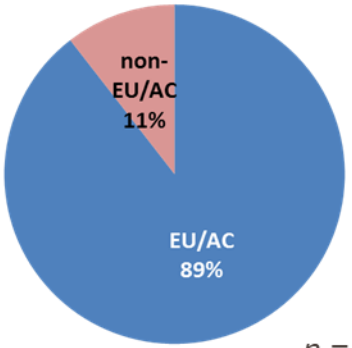
Estimation based on ~2,000 ERC H2020 reporting projects
Similar composition as observed in FP7



~ 40% of PhD students in ERC teams obtained their last academic degree (mostly master) in other country than the one hosting the ERC grant (11% in a non-EU/AC country)

~ 60% of postdocs in ERC teams obtained their PhD degree in other country than the one hosting the ERC grant (18% in a non-EU/AC country)

PhD student H2020



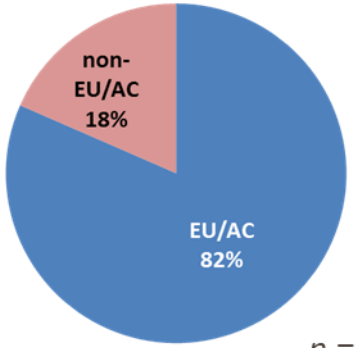
n = 2,761

non-EU/AC

Last degree in:

- IN – 21%
- US – 14%
- CN – 11%
- IR – 9%
- the rest from 35 countries

Postdoc H2020



n = 3,351

non-EU/AC

Last degree in:

- US – 30%
- CN – 14%
- IN – 11%
- AU, CA - 8%
- the rest from 22 countries

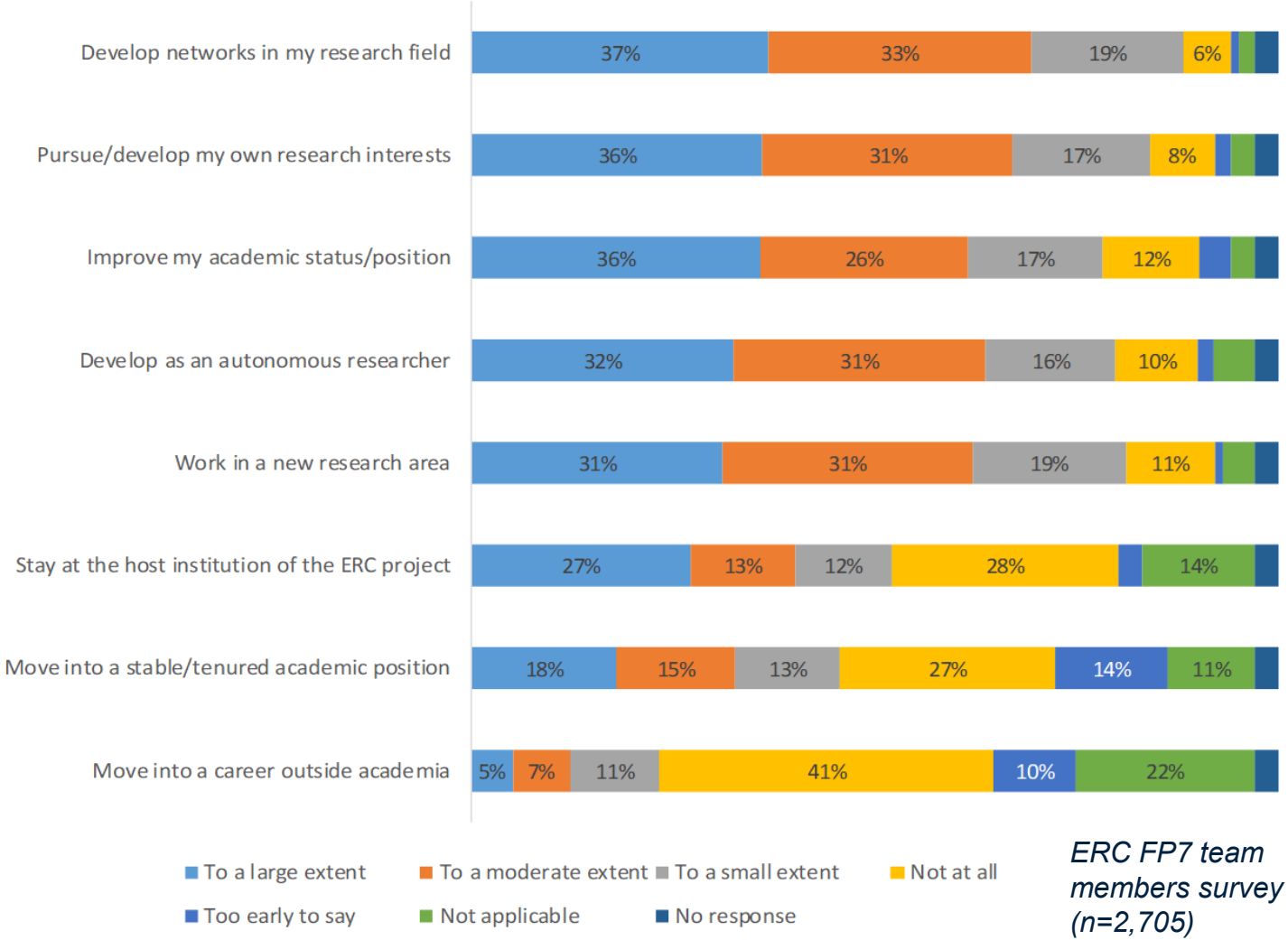
Career of PhD students after the ERC project

- 36% of PhD students continued in academia and experienced career progression
- 35% were still doing their PhD
- 9% exited research/innovation (e.g. to services, management, public administration*, etc)

*) e.g. approx. 40% of ERC Executive Agency staff have a PhD degree

The rest "do not know", etc.
Base: survey of ERC FP7 team members whose involvement with the ERC project had ended (n= 575 PhD students)
Note: potential bias because of difficulty in reaching team members outside academia

Career-enabling outcomes (all staff categories)



ERC FP7 team members survey (n=2,705)

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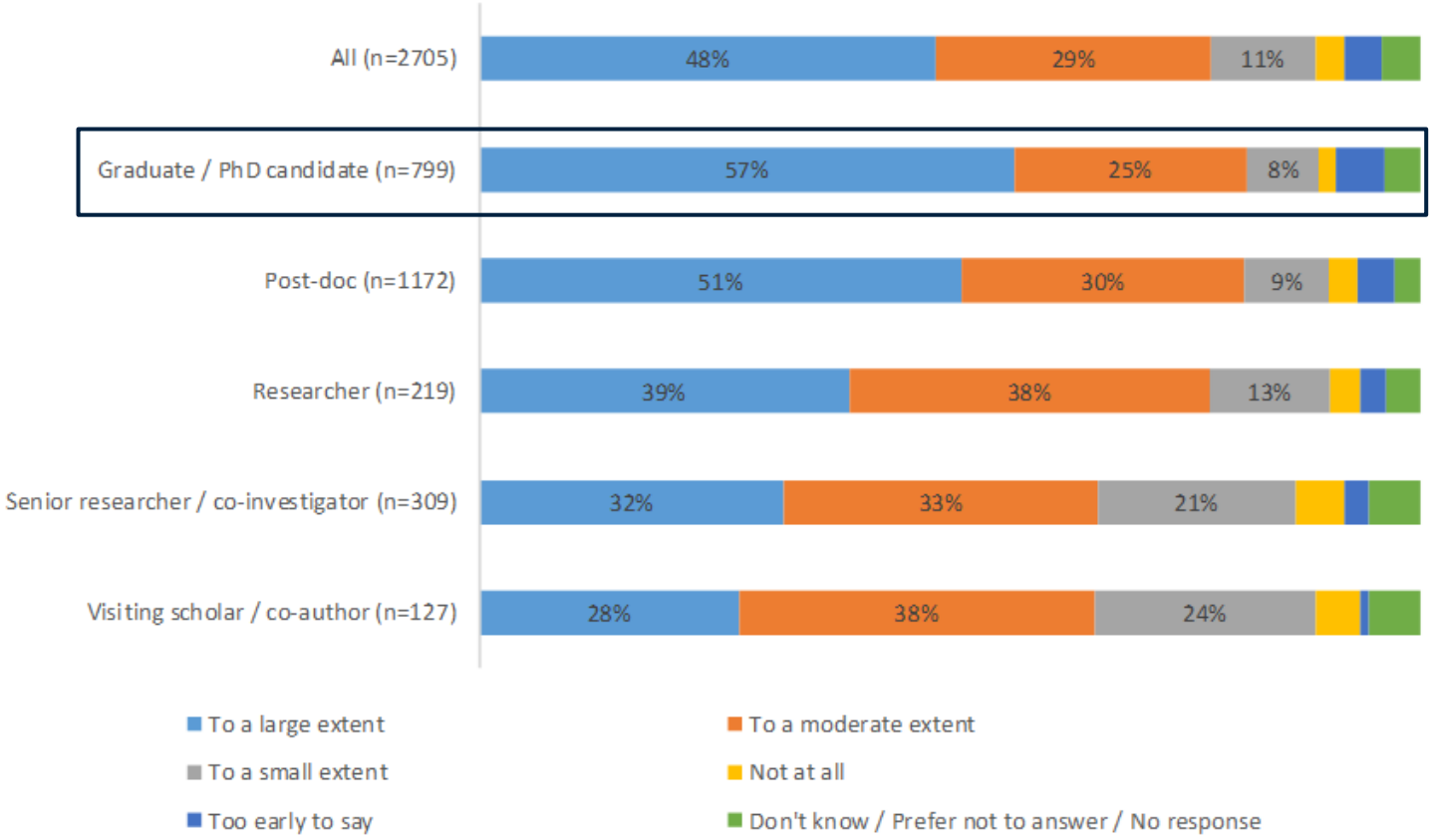
Examples of skills and experiences acquired by PhD students during an ERC project

Research-related skills and experience	% responding “to a large or moderate extent”
▪ Expert knowledge in research area	88%
▪ Specific technical skills	85%
▪ Research or technical skills into novel methods	80%
▪ Expert knowledge in emerging research areas	74%
▪ Cross-disciplinary knowledge	67%
▪ Specific knowledge in research relevant to industry	39%
	etc…

Transferable skills and experience	
▪ Communication and presentation skills	78%
▪ Ability to work in multinational environments	73%
▪ Data analysis and data management	67%
▪ Ability to mentor	50%
▪ Project management skills	50%
	etc…

ERC FP7 team members survey (n= 750 PhD students)

Extent to which the skills and experiences acquired during involvement in ERC project were applied to current main activity



Base: survey of ERC FP7 team members (n=2,705)
Note: disaggregation by position in ERC project does not include team members who did not provide information on their position or who selected 'other', so does not sum to 2,705

Some personal reflections

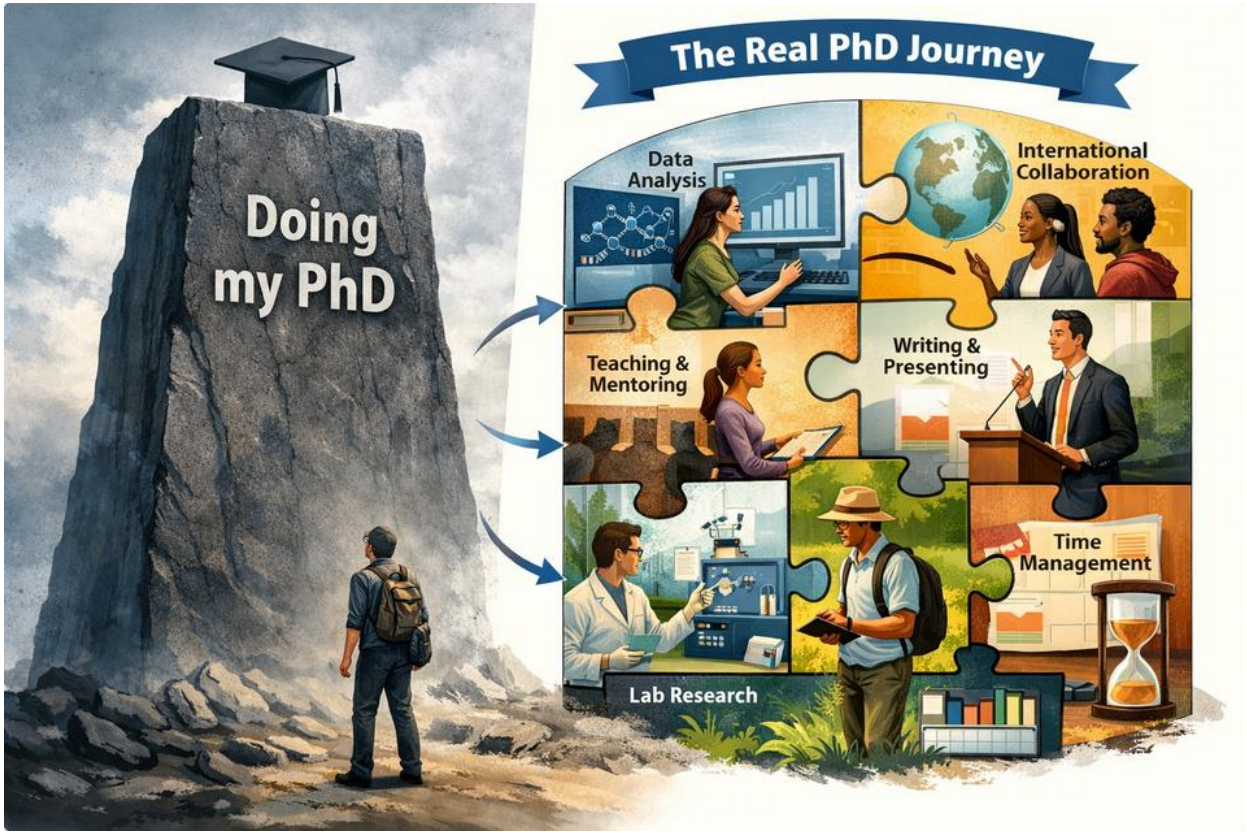
- PhDs are essential for European competitiveness and resilience

- Most PhDs cannot continue in Academia (pyramidal structure) but find a job in other domains of high relevance for society and industry: Increase awareness of the various possibilities

- Strengthen the translational skills
  - Problem solving mindset
  - Independence
  - Mentoring
  - International networking
  - Reporting skills (publications, presentations,…)
  - …

- Besides increasing the ERC Budget also expand the Eramus program: Deepens the European Integration

Skills awareness gap



(Image was AI-generated using ChatGPT)

Bridging the Skills awareness gap

- Structured self-reflection on skills gained during the PhD
- Explicit language for transferable competences
- Exposure to non-academic career paths and alumni examples
- Support in translating research experience into employer-relevant terms

https://vlir.be/phd-talent/

Thank You!

More information: erc.europa.eu

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