»To advocate for positive change in the policies, culture, and environment that affect the quality of training, well-being, and employment conditions of early career researchers«

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The European Council of Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers

Early-career researcher perspectives on

European funding opportunities for doctoral candidates

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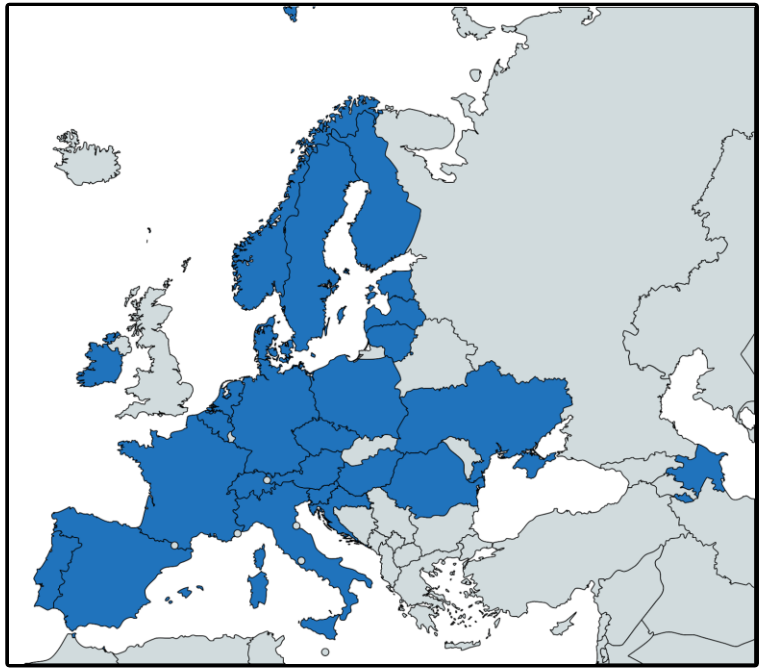
The European Council of Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers (Eurodoc)



Grassroots federation:

- **28 national associations** from
- **25 countries across Europe**

We represent **doctoral candidates and other early career researchers** at the European level

The 3-pillar structure is a proven success

The MSCA and the ERC strengths:

- **investigator-driven** and
- **excellence-focused**.

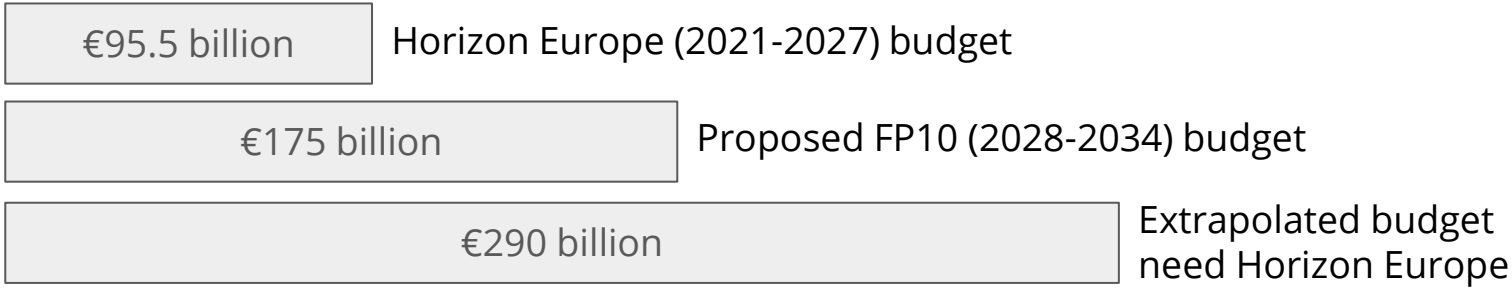
These programmes have

- stimulated research excellence,
- ensured high-quality European research career paths, and
- protected the freedom of scientific research.

The big challenge is underfunding

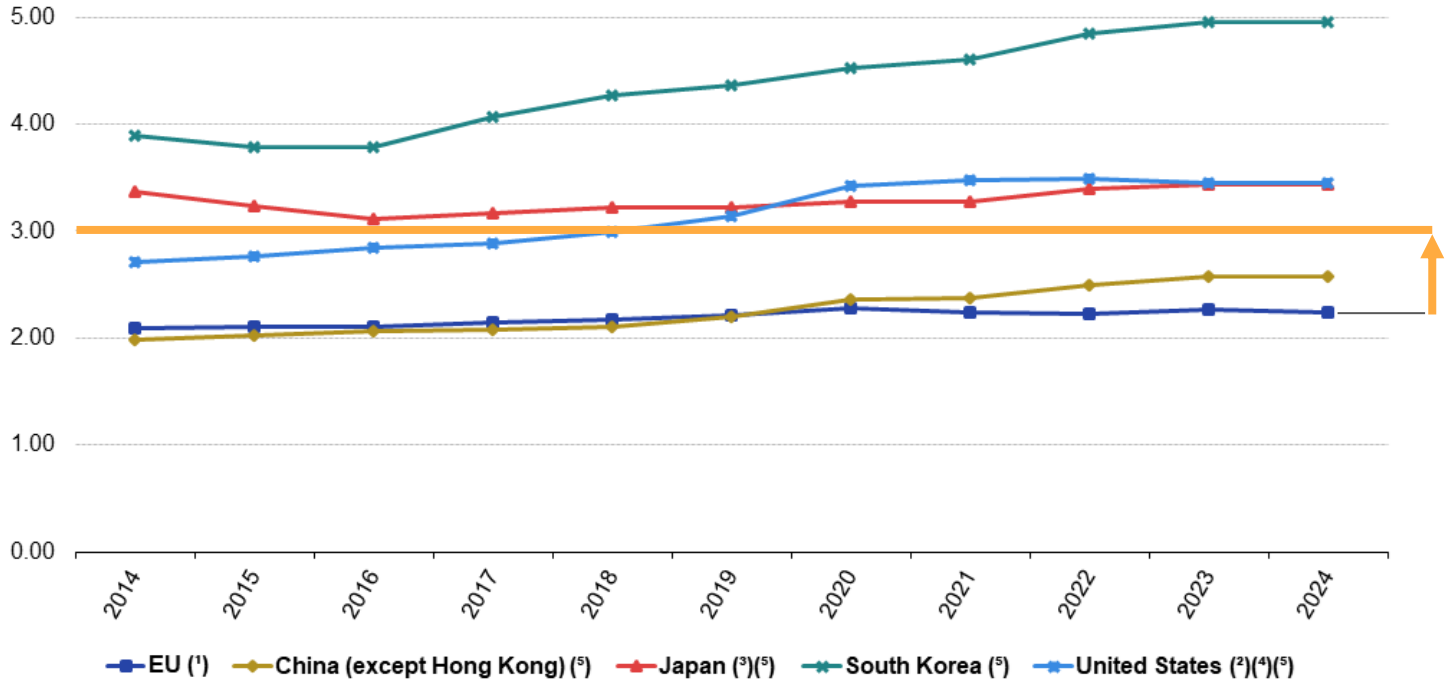
The role as flagship excellence drivers is challenged not by structure but by the

- **unfunded excellence gap at submission** – only 1 of 3 high-quality proposals submitted under Horizon Europe could be funded.
- **unfunded 4th year** – most DN do not cover the fourth year, as needed to align with Salzburg recommendations



Gross domestic expenditure on R&D, 2014-2024

(%, relative to GDP)



(1) 2014 to 2024 data: estimates
(2) excludes most or all capital expenditure, definition differs: 2014-2023
(3) 2018: break in series
(4) 2015, 2016, 2021 and 2023: break in series
(5) 2023 data

Source: Eurostat (online data code: rd_e_gerdtot) and OECD database

eurostat

Doctoral candidates are both the present and the future of academia

Doctoral candidates are

1) a key group of **research performing professionals** (approx. 50% of academic researchers, producing approx. 30% of research output),
2) the **future researchers and academic leaders** in training, and
3) competence providers for **future science and research uptake** in industry, healthcare, government, NGOs etc.

MSCA and ERC are the only (bottom-up) EU funding instruments for doctoral training

The only European instrument for **bottoms-up and excellence-driven** research funding.

- MSCA-DN: approx. **1800 doctoral candidates annually** (2024)
- ERC: projected **1600 doctoral candidates annually** (over the Horizon 2020 period)

with ~670,000 active doctoral candidates across the EU (2022), this means that **approx. 2% of European doctoral candidates** are funded via Horizon 2020 pillar I.

MSCA present a road model towards worker status for doctoral candidates

The **MSCA DN are a role model** in ensuring

- public advertising and transparent recruitment,
- competitive and transparent salary, and
- employment with social security and worker rights.

Professionalisation remains elusive for more than two decades:
Lack of worker status = lack of fundamental social rights.
→ Reduces attractiveness of research careers in Europe
→ Exacerbates brain malcirculation, particularly for widening countries
→ Drives talent loss for academia reducing research excellence

Freedom of research starts with doctoral candidates

Pillar I funding – **bottom-up approach** enabling **curiosity-driven research already at the doctoral stage**

Guidelines to promote excellent supervision practices **that put a value on academic freedom** of the doctoral candidates

> SUPERVISORS should balance guiding and directing supervision styles in order to encourage autonomy of the researcher in line with their career stage, and to support independence.

MSCA Guidelines for Supervision, p. 9

It remains crucial to set doctoral graduates up with the **experience of working in academically free environment**

To protect this freedom the independence of pillar 1 is paramount

Interconnected threats to research excellence

- lack of attractiveness of research careers because of lack of social security,
- a symptom of underfunding of the research system,
- barriers to talent circulation across Europe,
- diversion of the research budget to emerging or shifting political priorities.

A strong line-up for doctoral training as a lever for the fifth freedom

Combining **excellent, investigator-initiated science** with a framework for **intersectoral**, **interdisciplinary**, and **international mobility**

- Excellence driven, researcher-determined partnerships
- Seamless integration of research careers across the ERA
- Supporting funding, quality training, mobility and competence building

Symptoms of underfunding – **lack of quality employment, worker status and social security** – remain the significant barriers for mobility and research excellence across Europe.

Thank you for your attention!

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