

Making a difference for driving forces of research advancement: Early career researchers in Institutes for Advanced Studies

Netias Working Paper

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Postdoctoral researchers in the first years of their scholarly career ('Early Career Researchers' / ECRs: levels R2 and R3) play an important role in science and research worldwide. They significantly promote advancement in disciplinary and interdisciplinary studies, thus providing a basis for sustaining knowledge and for responding to the demanding issues and challenges of our time: early career researchers are the driving force of the future of research and innovation!

At the same time, ECRs, being already fully educated and highly ambitious, have to develop research independence and strive for individual success by finding their ways into different research communities. They often have not yet reached permanent positions within a highly competitive research arena. They need to experience personal and scholarly mobility at the same time as being in a challenging, crucial and increasingly precarious phase of building up their lives and careers. European and global research institutions as well as the European Commission have recognized the urgent need to strengthen early career research development. They have taken action in support of early career scholars in order to ensure the future of excellent research on different levels.¹

Institutes for Advanced Studies (IAS) are integral parts of the European and global research constellation. They provide intellectual freedom and an open space for intellectual discourse; they offer research time, exchange and support for a community of world-class scholars from a diversity of disciplines, countries and affiliations. Fixed-term stays as fellows at IAS aim at enabling and strengthening curiosity-driven, innovative, top-level research in all disciplines, and beyond disciplinary boundaries. Additionally, they help to build long-lasting scholarly networks, allow insights into novel research paths and provide international mobility, opportunities for interdisciplinary cooperation and for career development within and beyond academia.

The European Network of Institutes for Advanced Studies (Netias) unites 25 such IAS from all over Europe. Early Career Researchers make up a high proportion of fellows in Netias. Every year, the Netias member institutes host almost 250 of them from various disciplines and from Europe and around the world, providing around 2000 person-months of annual funding. Thus, fellowships at Netias institutes contribute significantly to postdoctoral funding schemes

¹ LERU Paper: [Harvesting talent: strengthening research careers in Europe](#), June 2010; EU Commission: [European Research Area Policy Agenda 2022-2024](#), ch. 4, EU Council: [Recommendation on a European framework to attract and retain research, innovation and entrepreneurial talents in Europe](#), July 2023; EU Horizon Europe: [Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions \(MSCA\)](#), with around 1600 funded early career fellows in 2024.

in Europe², be it through the IAS' own or through third-party funding, fostering mobility, career development, and research innovation.

In awareness of:

- the common responsibility to advance early career research development as an indispensable factor of the advancement of science and research,
- the necessity to strengthen scholars in the early stages of their career in recognition of their particular needs and innovative potential,
- the particular role and strengths of IAS for the freedom of research,
- the need for permanent improvement of and debate upon the roles of IAS and
- the diversity of research opportunities and potentials the high number of European IAS provides within the European research area,

Netias has agreed the following principles for the advancement of early career research in their member Institutes. These suggestions are offered as a tool, a perspective or a horizon for creating, carrying out and improving early career programmes in IAS and beyond.

I What difference do IAS make for ECRs?

Space, time and financial support for research, intellectual and academic development
– during a career phase of high pressure, new and time-consuming challenges

Individual freedom, independence and autonomy as a basis for research
– in a career phase where ECRs establish themselves as researchers

A diverse community of scholars, interdisciplinary communication, and lasting networks as impulses for innovation
– in a career phase with a focus on future success

A less-competitive research environment enabling curiosity, creativity and innovative ideas
– in a career phase of competition and establishing independent research positions

Reflexivity, critique and challenge as driving factors of research
– in a career phase after a concentrated PhD

Training and experiences facilitating pathways into employment
– in a career phase of finding a job within academia and beyond

II What difference do ECRs make for IAS?

Emergent, new and up-to-date research ideas and paradigms
– as drivers of innovation and development of knowledge

Intergenerational diversity together with senior fellows
– as a factor of academic diversity and quality

Challenging conventional hierarchies and promoting academic equality
– as a basis for interdisciplinarity, and to strengthen freedom in academia

Mutual multi-level challenges and partnerships
– as a basis for academic community building

² [EU- MSCA for 2025](#) provide funding for 1996 postdoctoral researchers in 2025. Cf. also Science Europe Working Group on Research Careers: [Postdoctoral Funding Schemes in Europe](#), October 2016.

III Which would be good criteria to select ECR fellows at IAS?

QUALITY of research – not just quantity

FUTURE POTENTIAL – not only past achievements

CREATIVE ORIGINALITY – not only being the best on old pathways

INVENTIVENESS – not only solving research questions

TRANSFER-ABILITY – not only specialization

ACADEMIC OPENNESS – beyond disciplinary silos

MOTIVATION FIT FOR THE INSTITUTION – rather than the next project funding