

Portugal and EMBO in numbers^a

29 EMBO Members

1 EMBO Young Investigator

6 EMBO Installation Grantees

9 EMBO Postdoctoral Fellows

45 EMBO Scientific Exchange Grantees

17 events funded by the EMBO Courses & Workshops programme were held in Portugal

1,494 scientists attended EMBO Courses & Workshops in Portugal

1,002 Portuguese nationals participated in EMBO Courses & Workshops

supported to attend conference/workshops

^a 2019 to 2025

EMBC Delegates

Prof. Margarida Amaral

BioISI Instituto de Biosistemas & Ciencias Integrativas, Universidade de Lisboa

Luisa Igreja

Foundation for Science and Technology, Ministry of Education, Science and Innovation

The EMBO Programmes are funded by the European Molecular Biology Conference (EMBC), an inter-governmental organization that comprises 32 member states.

Portugal has been an EMBC Member since 1994.

Facts and figures

The Portuguese Republic comprises an area of more than 92,000 square kilometres on the southwest of the Iberian Peninsula bordering Spain and the Atlantic, and two autonomous regions in the Atlantic: the archipelagos of Madeira and Azores.¹

Portugal has 36 universities⁵ including the University of Coimbra established in 1290 and considered one of Europe's oldest universities. More than 448,235 students were enrolled in tertiary education in 2023-24.²

Gross expenditure on research and development (GERD) rose almost 10% from 2023 to 2024 to reach 4,523 million euros, increasing as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product from 1.67% to 1.69%. The main sectors financing GERD were business enterprise providing 56.6%, and the government sector (33.2%). In 2024, an estimated 79,257 people in Portugal were employed in R&D work.⁶

Key figures

Population: 10.8 million²

R&D spending: 1.69%⁶

People employed in R&D: 79,257⁶

Patents (European Patent Office): 148⁷

Universities: 36⁵

Students enrolled in tertiary education: 448,235²

Horizon Europe key figures:¹

3,392 organizations including 649 small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)

69 ERC principal investigators

601 researchers funded by Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions

References

1. Nordic Cooperation, Facts about Portugal
2. Norwegian Government, Ministry of Education and Research
3. Eurostat, Population by educational attainment level, sex and age
4. OECD Data Base, Main Science and Technology Indicators
5. European Patent Office, Patent Index 2024
6. Research Council of Portugal
7. European Commission, Horizon Europe country profile
8. Statistics Portugal

EMBO opportunities in Portugal

EMBO Postdoctoral Fellowships

fund internationally mobile researchers for a period of up to two years. Applications open all year around.

EMBO Scientific Exchange Grants

fund research exchanges of up to three months. The grants facilitate collaborations with research groups with expertise, techniques or infrastructure that is unavailable in the applicant's laboratory. Applications open all year around.

The EMBO Young Investigator Programme

supports group leaders in the early stages of setting up their independent laboratories for a period of four years. Networking is a key aspect. Application deadline: 1 April.



Find more EMBO schemes at embo.org/funding

Maria Leptin | EMBO Science Journalism Fellowships

support science journalists and life scientists entering careers as science journalists covering life science research. Applications open all year around.

EMBO Courses & Workshops

stimulate exchanges of the latest scientific knowledge and provide training in experimental techniques. Application deadlines: 1 March and 1 July.

EMBO Press

publishes five journals that serve the global life science community: The EMBO Journal, EMBO Reports, EMBO Molecular Medicine, Molecular Systems Biology and Life Science Alliance, which is published in partnership with Rockefeller University Press and Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press.



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Focus on Portugal



Perspectives from Claudio Sunkel

Claudio Sunkel from 2005 to 2023 was the Portuguese delegate to the EMBC, the governing body responsible for funding EMBO programmes. He reflects on the evolution of the life sciences in Portugal since the 1990s, the support EMBO has provided to generations of researchers in Portugal, and why collaboration and mentorship remain central to his work. Claudio Sunkel is Full Professor of Molecular Biology at the University of Porto's Biomedical Institute (IBMC).



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You have had a long association with EMBO. Why did you accept to represent Portugal at the EMBC?

Serving as Portugal's delegate to the EMBC and the EMBL Council provided me with a broader perspective on how EMBO operates. I started regularly using EMBL databases around 1991-1992. Although I learned a little about EMBO at that time, it wasn't until I was elected to full membership in 2000 that I became truly aware of EMBO and its offerings. I understood that EMBO is not just a funding body, but a scientific network that brings researchers together. However, it extends beyond Europe through global exchange programmes, and I saw firsthand how it doesn't just respond to the current state of science. It shapes it, elevates sciences across and beyond EMBO Member States, and supports individuals at the most formative stages of their careers.

Would you say that EMBO is a "life sciences incubator", in a certain way?

Entering one of the EMBO communities is a vote of confidence. It tells researchers that their ideas are worth investing in. One significant contribution that often goes unnoticed when compared to the EMBO Fellowships Programmes or the Young Investigator Network is how EMBO Courses and Workshops bring people together. These events provide researchers with exposure to cutting-edge techniques, but more importantly, they foster a sense of community. Some of my students still talk about the connections they made at those workshops.

You have supervised more than 25 PhD students during your career and over 20 postdoctoral fellows. Can you share more about the EMBO impact in your lab?

One of the most memorable experiences was when Eurico Morais-de-Sa, now a principal investigator at i3S, the Institute for Research and Innovation in Health affiliated to the University of Porto, approached me with a project back in 2011. He was studying tissue polarity and how epithelial cells maintain their structure and polarity during division. That was not my area of research at the time as I had been working for several years on chromosome segregation and genome stability. But we saw the opportunity to do something new. How do cells in a single-cell-layer epithelium divide and at the same time maintain integrity? He applied for funding from the EMBO Postdoctoral Fellowship Programme and that support allowed for the collaboration to take off. Eurico led a fantastic postdoctoral work in my lab. We published numerous papers together, and we've had an ongoing partnership ever since.

Portugal joined the European Union in 1986 and the EMBC in 1994; its life sciences landscape has undergone significant changes since then. How has this transformation looked from your perspective?

Portugal has undergone numerous in-depth developments since joining the EU in 1986, whether at the societal, economic, or scientific level. Many in-depth developments have occurred it comes to life sciences; the changes have been significant. Before 1994, Portugal had limited life sciences PhD programmes, a low visibility at the international scale and minimal research infrastructures. After Portugal joined the EU and eventually EMBC, funding for mobility and training opportunities became more widely available. Emerging scientists travelled abroad, thanks to the EMBO

Fellowships Programme and other European funding schemes, to learn new skills and make science move forward. Portuguese institutions have also developed programmes in both Portuguese and English that have attracted members of the Portuguese diaspora, allowing a generation of scientists who received higher education in other countries to conduct PhDs and postdoctoral work in Portugal and help raise the national level of science. I like to say that Portugal's presence in life sciences didn't grow just by building labs, it grew by building people.

What do you think is most important for small or mid-sized countries to focus on in terms of scientific development?

The Portuguese story is an example that has proven very valuable to us, and, as I just mentioned, it invested in people, not just infrastructure. Training and mentoring matter more than buildings. And stay connected internationally. One of the reasons EMBO is so effective is that it creates a sense of belonging to a broader research community. That matters hugely for scientists in smaller countries. It provides them with access, visibility, and standards of excellence to aim for.

What continues to excite you in research today?

Curiosity, always. I remain fascinated by all aspects of the biological sciences, especially mitosis and how cells regulate cell division, including its control, particularly in a real tissue context. This includes how spindle orientation is influenced by polarity, mechanics, and checkpoints that impact genomic stability. And, most importantly, working with younger scientists whose fresh questions push me to rethink what I thought I knew is an essential aspect of my work.

Meet scientists from the EMBO communities

Ilana Gabanyi A new home for the gut-brain axis

Group Leader at the Gulbenkian
Institute for Molecular Medicine |
EMBO Installation Grantee

Ilana Gabanyi studies the interactions between gut-bacterial signal and brain neurons. In 2022, during her postdoctoral work, she demonstrated that microbe-derived compounds are found in the brain and can influence neuronal activity, with some of these interactions being sex- and age-dependent. Her team is now taking this discovery one step further to explore gut-derived bacterial compounds in the brain and how do sex and age hormones and alter neuronal responses.

Originally from Brazil, Gabanyi conducted her postdoctoral work at the Rockefeller University in the United States and the Institute Pasteur in France before establishing her group at the Gulbenkian Institute for Molecular Medicine in Oeiras, a city located on the outskirts of Lisbon. "After almost ten years abroad, I needed somewhere that felt closer to home", she explains. "Culturally and emotionally, Portugal became the best compromise between staying in Europe and being closer to Brazil."



The transition from postdoctoral associate to young principal investigator was made smoother by the support of an EMBO Installation Grant. "The grant came at the perfect moment", Gabanyi notes. "I had already moved to Portugal when I obtained it, and it provided me with the flexibility, visibility and the resources needed to properly launch my lab. And the EMBO Lab Leadership courses, whether on leadership or negotiation, were incredibly helpful. No one teaches you how to become a PI."

Gabanyi found Oeiras, and the whole country-at-large, to be an unexpectedly vibrant scientific community despite Portugal's geographic remoteness from major European transportation and scientific hubs. "People collaborate a lot and there is a real sense of solidarity. I've felt incredibly welcomed. It's been a rewarding move, scientifically and personally."