



Responsible Research Assessment
Revisiting the EMBO Funding Criteria
A workshop report

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Executive Summary

Responsible Research Assessment Revisiting the EMBO Funding Criteria

The EMBO Workshop on Responsible Research Assessment took place on 20 January 2026 in Heidelberg. It brought together approximately forty EMBO Members, including Members serving on the selection committees of different programmes, along with a small number of EMBO staff. This was the first cross-programme meeting convened by EMBO to discuss these issues. The goal was to discuss current eligibility and evaluation criteria, with the aim of ensuring that EMBO processes remain fair, robust, and fit for purpose in a changing research landscape. The focus was on the Postdoctoral Fellowships and the Young Investigator, Global Investigator and Installation Grant schemes. This report summarises the discussions and participants' suggestions arising from the workshop, spanning assessment of excellence, research outputs, broader contributions, contextual diversity, academic age, and application materials. The goal of the workshop was to stimulate further debate and to inform specific changes.

This section summarises the main outcomes of the workshop. Further details of the discussions and next steps can be found in the main text.

Main workshop outcomes

1. Defining and Recognising Excellence

While individual excellence is often intuitively recognisable, defining and assessing it consistently in the context of the EMBO competitive funding schemes involves multiple dimensions, and benefits from clear evaluation criteria and programme-specific objectives.

- Participants suggested that the unique identity of the EMBO programmes could benefit from a clearer strategic focus, in particular for the Postdoctoral Fellowships. This could include defining more specifically the kind of research, approaches and researcher profiles the programme aims to support.
- Participants suggested clarifying how “stepping out of the comfort zone” should be interpreted in EMBO evaluations, noting that innovative science can emerge both within and beyond an applicant’s previous research area.
- Participants suggested placing greater emphasis on recognising future potential alongside past achievements in Fellowship evaluation, and that assessing long-term research ambitions could play a greater role.

2. Publications and Other Research Outputs

Publications remain central to EMBO's evaluation processes and participants discussed whether current publication-related criteria and indicators are sufficient to capture applicants' scientific contributions fairly and consistently across schemes.

- First- and last- or senior- author publications are currently used as eligibility criteria. Participants recognised that authorship position does not always reflect individual scientific contribution across different career stages and research practices. They therefore recommended strengthening qualitative assessment through short narrative descriptions of the scientific value of key outputs and applicants' specific contributions.
- Participants recommended keeping journal names visible without using them as proxies for quality.
- A majority of participants supported recognising additional research outputs beyond traditional papers, such as datasets, software, protocols, and patents, in the evaluation process.

3. Recognition of Broader Contributions to the Research Community

Participants discussed whether activities such as mentoring, peer review, outreach, and efforts to improve research culture should be recognised in Young Investigator Network evaluations, reflecting wider developments in research assessment aligned with DORA and CoARA principles, which promote a more holistic evaluation of researchers' activities.

- Participants generally supported recognising broader contributions, particularly mentoring and lab leadership, while differing on how these should be incorporated into the evaluation.
- Participants agreed that, if included, the quality of such contributions should be prioritised over their number, and that they should be given less weight than scientific achievements in the evaluation.
- Participants suggested asking applicants to describe in the application how they intend to promote a positive research culture in their laboratories.

4. Geographical and Contextual Diversity

Data on the geographical distribution of Postdoctoral Fellows and Young Investigators show an uneven distribution of awardees within EMBC Member States.

- Participants expressed strong support for EMBO's initiatives to improve success rates for underrepresented countries and agreed that these should continue.
- Strong support was also shown for ongoing outreach efforts such as targeted visits to underrepresented countries and webinars to support applicants from those countries to prepare competitive applications.

- To further promote geographical equity, suggested actions included analysing outcomes in relation to GDP, R&D investment, and application rates; encouraging applicants to describe their research environments and available resources; and strengthening committee awareness of cultural and contextual differences.

5. Academic Age and Programme Name

Data from the Young Investigator Network schemes show a gradual increase in the average age of applicants and awardees in recent years. This trend reflects broader changes in life-science career pathways and prompted discussion on whether the current eligibility windows remain appropriate. In addition, since age is a protected characteristic in the UK and EU, there was a discussion about potentially renaming the scheme.

- Participants supported the current calculation of eligibility window based on years since the start of independence, highlighting that it provides sufficient flexibility to accommodate diverse career paths.
- Participants were divided on whether to modify the programme name, citing considerations such as strong brand recognition and potential reputational loss, as well as questions of accuracy and possible concerns under European anti-age discrimination legislation.

Conclusions

The workshop confirmed broad support for reviewing EMBO's eligibility and evaluation criteria in response to changes in research practice and the wider research-assessment landscape. Participants emphasised that any refinements should remain transparent, fair, and feasible across programmes, while preserving rigorous and consistent peer review.

The discussions highlighted several areas where there was substantial support for further development, including the use of short narrative elements to describe the scientific value of selected outputs and applicants' individual contributions, and continued attention to geographical and contextual diversity. While broader contributions to the research community, particularly mentoring and lab leadership, were recognised as important, some questions remain open. These include how broader contributions and non-traditional research outputs should be incorporated into evaluation, and whether particular criteria should be applied systematically across schemes or more selectively depending on programme aims and context.

Overall, the workshop provided a valuable basis for the continued refinement of EMBO's application processes, with the aim of ensuring that the programmes remain aligned with responsible research practices and fit for purpose in a changing research environment.

Workshop Report

Responsible Research Assessment

Revisiting the EMBO Funding Criteria

1. Introduction

EMBO's mission is to support excellence in the life sciences in Europe and beyond. EMBO carries out its mandate through the election of members, awards, scientific journals, and funding schemes that support researchers at different stages of their careers.

Peer review and researcher selection are core functions of EMBO. These activities rely on the expertise and engagement of EMBO Members, whose contributions are essential to upholding high standards of quality, fairness, and credibility across all programmes. EMBO also engages with its scientific community to gather input and uses this evidence to inform policy development and operational adjustments to its funding schemes.

EMBO has long been involved in international efforts to strengthen research assessment by promoting approaches that prioritise qualitative evaluation, support open science practices, and recognise a broader range of research contributions. EMBO was a founding signatory of the [San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment \(DORA\)](#) in 2012 and an early signatory of the [Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment \(CoARA\)](#) in 2023. In line with these frameworks, EMBO has moved beyond an assessment model relying mainly on publication-based metrics, such as the Journal Impact Factor, while maintaining peer review as the central mechanism for funding decisions. In addition, building on EMBO Press's commitment to open science, EMBO introduced a policy in 2022 recognising publicly peer-reviewed preprints as equivalent to peer-reviewed journal publications in funding applications.

Building on these developments, EMBO convened a workshop in January 2026 to discuss potential refinements to the criteria used to evaluate applicants in selected funding schemes. For the first time, the workshop brought together representatives from all programme committees, alongside the Chair of EMBO Council, members of the Young Investigator Network, staff responsible for the funding programmes, and the Policy team, which organised and moderated the discussions. The focus was on the Postdoctoral Fellowships and the Young Investigator Network: the Young Investigator Programme, the Global Investigator Network, and the Installation Grants.

The workshop was intended as a cross-programme discussion to gather perspectives on current processes and test potential directions for improvement. Its aims were to reflect on whether eligibility and selection criteria remain fit for purpose in an evolving research environment and to ensure that evaluation processes enable reviewers to operate fairly and feasibly, particularly in light of increasing application volumes.

The discussions addressed the definition of “excellence” and focused on key aspects of EMBO’s eligibility and evaluation criteria, including publications and other research outputs, broader contributions to the research community, geographical considerations, and eligibility windows. In preparation for the workshop, approaches used by other funding organisations were reviewed to assess the potential for alignment with emerging practices. Live polls were conducted at the end of each session to capture participants’ views. The results are included in Annex II.

This report summarises the discussions and areas of consensus that emerged, as well as where views diverged.

2. Discussion

Participants considered the potential advantages and disadvantages of maintaining the current eligibility and evaluation criteria or introducing changes. In doing so, they discussed possible implications for reviewers, applicants, and the EMBO office. Participants noted that programme committees and applicants generally perceive the current processes and criteria as functioning well. The purpose of the discussion was therefore not to assume that changes were necessary, but rather to gather perspectives from the community on possible refinements, while also considering approaches adopted by other funding organisations.

It should also be noted that EMBO operates within a specific disciplinary context, the life sciences, which allows evaluation criteria to remain closely aligned with field-specific priorities, such as the central role of publications in assessment. In contrast, other funding organisations often require more general frameworks to accommodate multiple disciplines.

As a starting point, the discussion considered how “excellence” can be defined and assessed in research funding, and the importance of clearly articulated evaluation criteria to guide this process.

3. Defining and Recognising “Excellence”

EMBO’s mission is to promote excellence in the life sciences. However, the concept of “excellence” itself remains difficult to define precisely. As EMBO Director Fiona Watt noted, excellence is often intuitively recognisable in individuals, yet assessing it systematically to rank applicants in a funding context is more complex. Reviewers must evaluate large numbers of applications and distinguish among them in a transparent and consistent way in order to allocate limited funds. This requires clear evaluation criteria and a shared understanding of what a funding scheme aims to recognise and support.

In this context, participants discussed whether EMBO should articulate a more distinctive profile for the projects and researchers it supports, particularly within the Postdoctoral Fellowship programme. Currently, a broad range of research projects addressing biological questions within EMBO’s scientific scope are eligible for funding.

The [Human Frontier Science Program \(HFSP\)](#), which explicitly prioritises high-risk, out-of-the-box research, was mentioned as an example of a funding programme with a clearly defined profile. One suggestion was that the EMBO Postdoctoral Fellowship scheme could similarly be characterised by a strategic focus or “EMBO factor” that would help reviewers identify the most suitable candidates among many strong applications and potentially reduce the number of eligible applications.

In relation to the idea of defining a distinctive EMBO factor, the discussion also addressed different ways in which excellence may be demonstrated. For example, moving into a new research area or “stepping out of the comfort zone” is often considered as a positive signal in Postdoctoral Fellowship and Young Investigator applications. At the same time participants noted that innovative or unconventional ideas may also emerge within an applicant’s familiar field of expertise, suggesting that excellence can take multiple forms. Participants therefore suggested that the notion of “stepping out of the comfort zone,” may require clearer definition.

Another aspect of the discussion concerned the balance between recognising past achievements and identifying future potential in fellowship evaluations. From this perspective, fellowships are viewed as an investment in the future. The concept of “promise” was mentioned in this context, referring to whether an applicant appears likely to develop into a leader in their field and establish an independent research trajectory. Participants suggested that asking applicants to outline their future research plans or ambitions could support reviewers in assessing this dimension of excellence.

Related to this was a discussion of the range of possible career trajectories for fellowship recipients, including academic careers, entrepreneurial paths, or roles in industry and translational research. In this context, the EMBO Fellowship Office has initiated surveys of both rejected and successful applicants to understand their subsequent career paths. These data may help provide a clearer picture of the career trajectories of applicants and Fellows and support future discussions on how different research careers are considered within the Fellowship scheme.

Overall, participants agreed that while excellence can be recognised in individuals at all career stages, it was important to have fair and transparent criteria for assessing applicants relative to one another in EMBO funding schemes.

4. Publications and Other Research Outputs

A substantial part of the workshop was focused on the role of publications in the EMBO selection processes. Peer-reviewed publications play a central role in the EMBO evaluations, as they are the primary means of communicating research findings in the life sciences and are widely used as indicators of scientific contribution and recognition within the community.

Within the EMBO schemes, eligibility requires that applicants have peer-reviewed publications, either in scholarly journals or on recognised peer-reviewed preprint platforms. In addition, applicants must fulfil specific authorship criteria: first or co-

first author for the Postdoctoral Fellowships, last author for the Young Investigators and senior author for Global Investigators. In contrast, there are no authorship requirements for Installation Grantees. Formally peer-reviewed preprints also fulfil current eligibility criteria.

Current policies reflect EMBO's commitment to open science and innovation in research communication. Through EMBO Press, the organisation has played a leading role in developing and promoting new approaches to scientific publishing and the open dissemination of research. Initiatives such as the promotion of preprints, the recognition of refereed preprints, and the development of mechanisms such as micro-attributions within publications, aim to ensure that research contributions are shared transparently and credited appropriately. In line with these efforts, EMBO introduced a policy recognising refereed preprints as an eligible research output in 2022, with the intention of maintaining consistency between its funding policies and its wider engagement in advancing open and responsible research practices. The uptake so far has been limited, but there are already examples of fellowships being awarded to candidates with refereed preprints.

4.1 Authorship positions

First- and last-author publications are currently used as eligibility criteria. These requirements reflect traditional conventions associated with authorship positions: first authors are generally assumed to be the main contributors to the research and manuscript (as expected for Postdoctoral Fellows), while last or senior authors are typically expected to have defined the scientific direction, secured funding, and supervised the work (as expected of early-career Principal Investigators). A discussion focused on whether traditional authorship positions remain appropriate eligibility criteria given evolving research practices.

Arguments against use of authorship positions included that conventions vary substantially between laboratories, and author order does not always reflect actual contributions. In some contexts, conflicts over author order can arise, and final author lists may reflect career considerations or internal dynamics rather than contribution ([Resnik & Smith, 2023](#)). In other cases, intellectual contributions are more likely to secure prominent authorship positions, while substantial technical or methodological work may not ([Assraf & Fire, 2025](#)). Moreover, interdisciplinary research, particularly in fields like bioinformatics, often involves large teams in which multiple authors contribute at similar levels making linear authorship hierarchies less meaningful ([Zwart, 2024](#)).

Taken together, these considerations suggest that first and last authorship alone may be an incomplete measure of scientific contribution and independence, and may contribute to an unhealthy competition within and between collaborating labs.

While the workshop participants recognised authorship as an imperfect proxy used to screen for eligibility rather than a measure of excellence, they emphasised its operational value for assessing the high applicant volume and its aid in managing

reviewers' important workload. Notably, a strong concern was that removing eligibility criteria based on first/last authorship could lead to a sharp increase in application numbers, making the initial selection step difficult to manage.

Policies implemented by other funders, including the European Research Council (ERC), the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF), and the Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI) were presented. These organisations do not use specific authorship positions as eligibility criteria and have introduced narrative components in funding applications, requiring applicants to describe their contributions rather than simply list outputs, with positive feedback both from reviewers and applicants.

Participants suggested similarly requiring applicants to the EMBO Postdoctoral Fellowships and the Young Investigator schemes to describe both the scientific value of their listed publications and their individual contributions, to help reviewers evaluate their level of leadership and independence. Dedicated fields could be added in the application forms with strict word limitations. It was noted that the Young Investigator Programme and the Global Investigator scheme already ask applicants to describe their three best publications; participants suggested adding a description of the applicant's role.

Recent initiatives aimed at providing richer information on authors' contributions were also presented. These included the [Contributor Role Taxonomy](#) (CRedit) as well as the micro-attribution system introduced by the EMBO Journals ([Pulverer, 2024](#)), which details contributions to individual figures within a publication. Participants noted that, while CRedit could offer a structured way to describe contributions, micro-attributions, although valuable for journal peer review, were considered too burdensome for funding applications. No consensus was reached on using these tools in the EMBO evaluation process. It was suggested that links to ORCID or Google Scholar profiles could help reviewers assess output in context.

Overall, participants emphasised that the question is not only which indicators best capture scientific contribution in principle, but also which approaches are comparable and can be applied consistently across very large applicant pools. Within this context, publication-related indicators such as first- and last- or senior-author position still function as practical screening tools. Nevertheless, EMBO will continue to explore new approaches to research assessment.

4.2 Limiting the number of publications in applications

A related question was whether to limit the number of publications included in applications. The rationale was that a focused selection, accompanied by a brief narrative describing scientific value and individual contribution, would allow deeper, more qualitative assessment, while remaining manageable within existing workload constraints and reducing potential bias toward applicants with longer publication lists.

Several funders, including ERC, SNSF and Wellcome, request a limited number of research outputs of independent investigators (typically five to ten). This approach

would be particularly relevant for Young Investigator Network applications, as Postdoctoral Fellowship applicants generally have shorter publication records.

Opinions were divided. Some participants supported limiting publication numbers, although it was noted that different fields produce different numbers of papers. Some researchers publish many small, incremental papers, while others focus on fewer, larger papers. On the other hand, other participants argued that comprehensive lists provide valuable information.

No consensus was found on whether to limit the number of publications listed in an application.

4.3 Role of journal names

A further discussion point was on whether journal names should be removed from application material to help focus attention on the scientific value of research results rather than on the prestige of the journal. Participants were informed that the HHMI introduced a policy in 2024 removing journal names from application material, replacing them with Persistent Identifiers (e.g., PMID or DOIs). The group considered whether a similar policy could be appropriate for EMBO.

Participants discussed extensively the informational and symbolic role of journal names. Many emphasised that journal prestige risks functioning as an unreliable proxy for the quality or the excellence of individual papers, shifting attention away from the content. At the same time, some participants argued that journal names provide useful context about the peer review process, helping to distinguish reputable journals from predatory ones, as certain journals are generally perceived to apply more rigorous standards. It was also noted that, in practice, journal identities often remain visible through digital identifiers, which could limit the impact of removing them.

Overall, participants showed strong consensus for keeping journal names in applications, while continuing to avoid referring to them when comparing candidates.

4.4 Considering other research outputs

While scientific publications remain central to EMBO's evaluation processes, the discussion explored whether and how to recognise research outputs beyond peer-reviewed papers and preprints, such as open datasets, protocols, methods, codes, software and patents. Recognising such outputs would acknowledge engagement in open science practices, actively promoted by EMBO Press and other journals. The discussion also included whether, and how, the quality of these outputs could be assessed.

Examples from other funders, including [ERC](#), [SNSF](#), and [Wellcome](#), were presented, all of which consider a broader range of outputs alongside publications.

Participants in favour of including other research outputs in EMBO's evaluation criteria argued that high-quality, openly available large-scale datasets, software and

other tools and resources are foundational to AI-driven research and can more broadly accelerate discovery across life science fields. Such outputs can, in some cases, have bigger impact than traditional research papers as they are often the foundation of other research projects. Community databases (e.g. [Flybase](#) and [BLAST](#)) have substantial community impact while patents may demonstrate translational value and application potential. Large-scale data production is a significant scientific contribution, often requiring organisation of teams and clear research vision.

However, several concerns were raised. This included the view that outputs are meaningful only when linked to publications that provide biological interpretation of the data; difficulties in attributing individual credit for large collaborative datasets; challenges in assessing the quality of datasets, protocols, and methods; and the fact that applicants' contributions to patents might be particularly difficult to assess.

Recognised repositories were suggested as potential quality indicators, analogous to journals for publications. The German Research Foundation (DFG) [model](#) was discussed as a possible approach, distinguishing between a Category A: Peer-reviewed outputs (e.g. journal articles, conference papers, reviewed preprints, books) and a Category B: Non-peer-reviewed outputs (e.g. unrefereed preprints, datasets, software, codes, patents, science communication materials, contributions to infrastructures) with a maximum number in each category.

A majority of participants supported including research outputs beyond traditional publications and assessing the quality of such outputs using indicators such as usage, impact or peer assessment.

In conclusion, participants supported retaining authorship positions as selection criteria, while strengthening qualitative assessment through narrative descriptions of selected outputs and applicants' contributions. There was also support for keeping journal names visible and for recognising a broader range of research outputs, although some questions remain open regarding how such outputs should be assessed in practice.

5. Recognition of Broader Contributions to the Research Community

Beyond research outputs, funding organisations increasingly consider whether, and how, to recognise researchers' broader contributions to the scientific community. Such contributions may include mentoring and supervision, teaching, peer review, public engagement, community building, and initiatives that support diversity and inclusion. While these activities do not directly constitute research outputs, they play a critical role in fostering a healthy research culture and in enabling high-quality science. Recognising such contributions aligns closely with the DORA and CoARA principles.

Within EMBO, exceptional contributions beyond research excellence are considered in the context of Membership election, including translational impact, training programmes, mentorship, outreach, and activities that promote diversity. The workshop therefore examined whether similar considerations should be introduced

into the evaluation of Young Investigator Network applications, and if so, how they could be assessed fairly and feasibly. It was considered inappropriate to consider them for the Postdoctoral Fellowships, given the early career stage of the applicants.

5.1 Should broader contributions be included among the selection criteria?

Participants looked at funding organisations which have introduced mechanisms allowing applicants to report contributions beyond traditional research outputs. The SNSF, the DFG and the ERC all allow applicants to report their wider contributions to the research community. However, this is generally optional and not assessed as part of the evaluation process. At the ERC these elements are used by reviewers to help them better understand the context of applicants' research achievements and peer recognition. At the same time, the ERC views supervision as a normal component of a researcher's role and therefore does not consider this as additional information. In contrast, Wellcome mandatorily requires and formally assesses wider contributions as part of the application review.

Workshop participants discussed different perspectives on whether broader contributions should be included among the selection criteria for the EMBO Young Investigators.

Some participants argued that contributing to a healthy research culture should be encouraged throughout the research career pipeline, rather than only at senior stages. Activities such as mentoring, outreach, peer review, and other forms of community engagement were seen as important aspects of scientific leadership and as contributions that should be recognised and encouraged early in researchers' careers.

Others emphasised that introducing broader contributions as a formal requirement at this career stage could place unrealistic expectations on applicants who are already focused on establishing their research programmes, securing funding, building their teams, and managing personal responsibilities. Concerns were also raised about a model that implicitly favours applicants who excel at visible community activities, potentially disadvantaging those whose primary strengths lie in scientific creativity or technical innovation. It was also emphasised that funding organisations' responsibilities should not be conflated with those of universities and research institutions.

Participants broadly supported recognising broader contributions, particularly mentoring and lab leadership. One suggestion was to ask applicants to describe, in narrative form, actions they plan to take to foster a positive research culture, rather than focusing only on past or current activities.

It was also suggested that such contributions could be included on an optional basis rather than as mandatory criteria, so as not to disadvantage applicants who have focused primarily on establishing their research. Applicants could be given the opportunity to describe relevant current activities, even if these are not formally assessed in the evaluation.

Participants also discussed whether broader contributions should be considered systematically across all applications or used more selectively for applicants in the so-called “grey zone”, identified after the first step, where candidates are qualitatively very similar, and traditional evaluation criteria do not clearly distinguish between them. No clear consensus emerged on this point.

5.2 Should the quality of additional contributions be assessed?

There was consensus that, if broader contributions were to be included in the evaluation, their quality, rather than their quantity, should be assessed, while recognising challenges in doing so fairly.

One concern was that assessing the quality of outreach, mentoring, or service roles could favour applicants from prestigious or well-funded institutions, where such activities are supported by dedicated structures, potentially disadvantaging those from less well-resourced environments.

Several participants questioned whether incorporating “soft” criteria would increase subjectivity. It was noted that reviewers are experts in assessing scientific quality, and that focusing on science allows for more consistent and transparent decision-making.

Specific to peer review activity, developments in transparent peer review may, in the future, enable a more meaningful assessment of the quality and substance of peer-review contributions. By making review reports and editorial decision processes more openly available, such approaches could provide greater visibility into the intellectual and evaluative work involved in peer review, moving beyond simple counts of reviewing activity. Related work is currently being undertaken within CoARA working group co-chaired by EMBO, which is exploring how peer-review contributions might be more transparently documented and appropriately recognised in research assessment processes.

5.3 How should these contributions be weighed against existing criteria?

Discussions also addressed how broader contributions should be positioned relative to existing evaluation criteria.

Reference was made to [Wellcome’s evaluation framework](#), which allocates a substantial proportion (25%) of the overall score to research culture. For early-career applicants, this assessment focuses primarily on plans and intentions rather than track record. Participants noted that this approach signals that scientific excellence encompasses more than research output.

The general consensus was that for the EMBO Young Investigator Network, broader contributions to the scientific community should have less weight than scientific achievements.

Overall, participants broadly supported recognising broader contributions to the research community, particularly mentoring and lab leadership, and agreed that, if

considered, these should be assessed qualitatively and given less weight than scientific achievements. However, no clear consensus emerged on how such contributions should be incorporated into the evaluation process, including whether they should be considered systematically, selectively, or on an optional basis.

6. Geographical and Contextual Diversity

This session considered how differences in research environments across countries and regions can influence researchers' opportunities and careers. It included a high-level reflection on EMBO's role in addressing geographical disparities.

Data on the geographical distribution of Postdoctoral Fellows and Young Investigators were presented, showing recurring patterns in destination countries and highlighting that some countries consistently receive no grantees.

To address the disparities, EMBO introduced the [Increasing Participation Initiative](#) from 2021 to 2024, which led to a substantial increase in the success rate of Postdoctoral Fellows from the eligible countries (from 5% to 21%). However, data showed that geographical distribution reverted to pre-initiative patterns at the end of the initiative, indicating that sustained measures are required to maintain the impact. A modified version of the initiative was therefore introduced in 2025 and will run until 2029. During this period, four Postdoctoral Fellowships are reserved for researchers going to countries without awards in the previous two rounds, and one Young Investigator award is reserved for a country that has not received a grant in the previous four years.

Participants noted the uneven distribution of well-funded research centres and institutes across Europe. This raised a strategic question for EMBO: should its focus be solely on supporting the most outstanding individual researchers, or also on building scientific capacity across European countries? Moving forward, EMBO will continue targeted initiatives that both recognise exceptional researchers wherever they are and contribute to strengthening scientific capacity.

EMBO initiatives include extensive outreach, such as webinars in every EMBC country, and targeted outreach visits by EMBO Members and successful grantees. Efforts to negotiate co-funding with national agencies for candidates who narrowly miss the funding cut-off have met with limited success so far.

The role of the Installation Grants within the Young Investigator Network was highlighted as an effective mechanism to attract talented researchers to under-represented countries. These grants include an additional contribution from the host country and support researchers returning to establish a laboratory there. Installation Grantees have a strong impact on building research capacity in these countries.

There was consensus that EMBO's ongoing efforts to promote greater geographical diversity are valuable and should be continued.

Participants suggested potential additional measures, including normalizing outputs to geographical context by asking applicants to describe available infrastructure and funding conditions in current or previous institutes, and analysing outcomes in relation to GDP, R&D investment, and application rates. At the same time, participants recognised that normalisation formulas may not be feasible given their complexity. Expanding eligibility windows and eliminating the last author requirement were also mentioned as possible useful measures. Moreover, while EMBO already instructs selection committees on how to mitigate implicit bias, introducing committee training on cultural awareness could be considered.

For the Fellowships, other proposed measures included reducing the emphasis placed on the scientific prestige of the host institution and focusing assessment more on the resources, facilities, and supervision available to applicants.

7. Programme Name and Academic Age

This workshop session addressed how academic age and scientific independence are defined and assessed across the Young Investigator Network schemes. The discussion combined data on age trends with reflections on eligibility criteria and the increasing diversity of research careers and systems. Participants discussed whether calculating eligibility based on years since the start of scientific independence, as in the Young Investigators and Global Investigators schemes, remains appropriate, or whether years since completion of the PhD, as used in the Installation Grant scheme, should be adopted in the other schemes.

7.1 Calculating the eligibility window

Data from 2011 to 2025 showed that the average age of both applicants to and awardees of the Young Investigator Programme has increased by approximately three years. The current average age at selection is 38.5 for Young Investigators, 36.2 for Installation Grantees and 39.8 for Global Investigators. It remains unclear whether this trend reflects longer postdoctoral phases in the life sciences, or broader structural changes in research career trajectories. Global Investigators tend to be slightly older due to the longer eligibility window (see below).

Eligibility criteria vary across the programmes but generally require applicants to demonstrate scientific independence. For the Young Investigator Programme, applicants must have been independent group leaders for at least one year and no more than four years. For the Global Investigator Network, applicants must have held an independent group leader position for at least one year and less than six years. For the Installation Grants programme, applicants must be within nine years of obtaining their PhD and have between zero and two years of independence.

To assess independence, committees typically consider operational indicators such as financial autonomy, the ability to publish independently from previous supervisors, and the supervision of doctoral students or postdoctoral researchers. However, participants noted that applying such criteria in practice is not always straightforward.

The discussion focussed on how to calculate the start of independence. Participants noted that independence is rarely a clear-cut transition and may vary across national systems, institutional arrangements and disciplines. In some contexts, researchers may become formally independent but lack sufficient funding or resources, limiting their ability to produce results and publish. Situations such as remaining at the same institution after postdoctoral training or working in joint or shared laboratories may also complicate the definition of independence. As a result, eligibility assessments in the Young Investigators schemes rely often on case-by-case evaluation and on applicants proactively checking their eligibility.

Participants also noted that signs of emerging independence may sometimes be visible earlier in a researcher's career. For example, principal investigators may acknowledge that a particular publication or research idea was largely driven by a postdoctoral researcher or junior scientist, indicating an early capacity to develop and lead research projects independently. At the same time, traditional publication markers continue to function as practical signals of career stage. First-author publications are generally expected at the end of doctoral training, while last- or senior-author publications are commonly interpreted as evidence that a researcher has reached the stage of leading an independent research programme.

Some participants suggested that calculating eligibility based on years since PhD completion could provide a simpler and more easily verifiable framework. The ERC model was cited as an example, as it uses the date of PhD completion as the reference point, allowing flexibility to accommodate diverse career paths (M Leptin, 2024). National approaches were also discussed, including the system used by the Research Council of Finland, which structures eligibility around a defined period following the PhD when researchers apply for postdoctoral or early group leader funding.

However, concerns were raised that a strict PhD-based eligibility calculation could disadvantage researchers with non-linear career trajectories, including extended postdoctoral phases, career breaks or time spent outside academia, potentially narrowing the effective eligibility window.

Participants emphasised that the Young Investigator Network committees have developed mechanisms to address the ambiguity inherent in the current system through contextual evaluation, including assessment of publication records and discussion during the interview stage. The current approach based on the start of independence was considered appropriate for the time being and offered valuable flexibility. In practice, independence can be operationalised through indicators such as the date of appointment as a principal investigator or the date when funding to establish a research group is awarded, even though these events may not always coincide.

Overall, participants did not see an immediate need to modify the eligibility window for the Young Investigator and Global Investigator schemes.

7.2 Should the name of the Young Investigator Programme be changed?

Participants also discussed whether the name of the programme remains appropriate. The term “young” could raise questions about compliance with anti-age discrimination legislation in the UK and the EU. Even if intended to refer to career stage rather than biological age, the term might still be interpreted as indirect discrimination.

Several participants argued in favour of retaining the current name, citing its strong brand recognition and concerns that a change might reduce visibility. Survey results from current and former members of the Young Investigator Network in 2025 (see Annex III) also indicated strong support for keeping the existing name and limited concern about potential age-related implications. Others noted that prestigious funding programmes often maintain their visibility despite name changes. Examples included EMBO’s Postdoctoral Fellowship Programme, previously known as the Long-Term Fellowships, and the European Commission’s Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions, formerly the Marie Curie Actions. Participants also discussed whether a name change should be considered proactively or only in response to a concrete legal challenge.

Suggestions for possible alternative names were collected through the Young Investigator Network survey and included EMBO Investigators, EMBO Early Career Investigators, EMBO Research Independence Programme, EMBO New Investigators, EMBO New Independent PIs, and EMBO Rising Stars. Some workshop participants suggested redefining the meaning of the “Y” in order to preserve the established YIP acronym.

Participants were evenly split on whether to keep the programme’s current name or change it.

Overall, participants did not see an immediate need to modify the current approach to calculating the eligibility window for the Young Investigator and Global Investigator schemes, considering that the existing focus on the start of scientific independence provides useful flexibility across different career paths and systems. By contrast, views were divided on whether the name of the Young Investigator Programme should be changed, reflecting both the strength of the programme’s existing identity and concerns about whether the term “young” remains the most appropriate description.

8. Application Forms, Supporting Materials and New Tools

Participants discussed opportunities to further streamline the structure of the Fellowship Programme evaluation forms in order to support efficient assessment. It was noted that relevant information is currently distributed across multiple sections of the application, and that bringing key elements together more clearly could help reviewers navigate applications more easily. Participants also reflected on whether some of the materials currently requested could be refined to ensure that the information provided is as useful and informative as possible for the evaluation process.

Reference letters from previous supervisors were frequently described as uniformly positive and therefore of limited value in differentiating between candidates. Comparative statements ranking candidates among the top percentage of students were similarly considered to provide limited differentiation, and it was suggested to eliminate them. Letters from the heads of host laboratories were also noted as overly positive and often focused on the quality of the proposed research project rather than on the supervision, mentoring, and training that the host laboratory would provide.

Participants therefore suggested reconsidering the role and structure of reference letters. They could either be removed from the application process or structured more explicitly to guide reviewers toward more relevant information. In addition, host laboratory letters could be refocused to describe how the host laboratory plans to support the candidate through supervision, mentoring, and training, without commenting on the research project itself. Introducing length limits, such as word or character counts, was also proposed.

Alongside possible changes to the application materials, participants expressed interest in exploring technological solutions to support the evaluation process. In particular, there was support for experimenting with existing AI-based tools designed to extract and synthesise relevant information from applications, such as indicators of novelty, unconventional ideas, or contextual factors related to the host laboratory, pending clarification of potential legal constraints on data processing and AI use in funding decisions. Examples mentioned included existing tools such as [q.e.d. Science](#) and [Nature Research Assistant](#).

Overall, participants supported refining the Fellowship Programme application materials to make them more focused, informative, and useful for evaluation, particularly in relation to reference letters and the presentation of key information. Participants also expressed interest in exploring technological tools to support assessment, although this remained a more tentative area for further consideration, subject in particular to clarification of legal constraints.

9. Conclusions and Next Steps

The workshop confirmed broad support for reviewing EMBO's eligibility and evaluation criteria in response to changes in research practice and the wider research-assessment landscape. Participants emphasised that any refinements should remain transparent, fair, and feasible across programmes, while preserving rigorous and consistent peer review.

The discussions highlighted several areas where there was substantial support for further development, including the use of short narrative elements to describe the scientific value of selected outputs and applicants' individual contributions and continued attention to geographical and contextual diversity, while broader contributions to the research community, particularly mentoring and lab leadership, were recognised as important.

Some questions remain open. These include how broader contributions and non-traditional research outputs should be incorporated into evaluation, and whether particular criteria should be applied systematically across schemes or more selectively depending on programme aims and context.

In response to the workshop discussions, EMBO has already begun implementing some changes. In the Fellowship Programme, starting in 2027, applicants will be asked to describe the scientific value of selected publications and their individual contribution to them through a dedicated narrative field subject to word limits. In addition, the Fellowship Office is working on restructuring and refocusing reference letters from previous supervisors and from heads of host laboratories, and has established a dedicated working group to consider the broader scope of the programme.

In the Young Investigator Network schemes, the existing fields in which applicants describe the scientific value of selected publications will be expanded to include a description of their role in those publications. The Young Investigator Programme will also encourage applicants to describe how they intend to promote a positive research culture in their laboratories.

EMBO will consider a possible name change for the Young Investigator Programme, with the aim of adopting a name that more appropriately reflects the career stage and typical age of applicants and awardees, while avoiding concerns related to age discrimination.

Overall, the workshop provided a valuable basis for the continued refinement of EMBO's funding criteria and application processes, with the aim of ensuring that the programmes remain aligned with responsible research practices and fit for purpose in a changing research environment.

10. ANNEX I: List of workshop participants

Fellowship Committee

Sigal Ben-Yehuda ONLINE
David Drew [also Course Committee]
Alain Goossens
Edward A. Lemke
Maria Dolores Martin Bermudo
Michela Matteoli ONLINE
Lea Sistonen
Robert Tampé
Danijela Matic Vignjevic

Young Investigator Committee

Gaëlle Legube ONLINE
Guillermina López-Bendito ONLINE
Laura Machesky
Jacques Neefjes
Marcin Nowotny

Global Investigator Network Committee

Ilaria Malanchi
Ruth Massey ONLINE

Installation Grants Committee

Katja Sträßer
Miguel Torres

Membership Committee

Pilar Cubas
Birgitta Henriques Normark
Gianni Liti
Lori Passmore
Giuseppe Testa ONLINE
Pavel Tomancak
Bas van Steensel

Course Committee

Buzz Baum ONLINE
Ewelina Knapska
Guillermo Montoya

Policy Advisory Board

Mónica Bettencourt-Dias

Members of the Young Investigator Network

Jelena Godrijan
Yen-Ping Hsueh

EMBO Council

Marta Miączyńska

Other EMBO Members

Mariann Bienz
Anja Groth ONLINE
Gioacchino Natoli
Eric Westhof

EMBO staff

Sandra Bendiscioli, *Policy Programme*
Roberto Efraín Díaz, *Young Investigator Programme*
Karin Dumstrei, *Fellowship Programme*
Thomas Lemberger, *Open Science*
Pauline Ronnet, *Policy Programme*
Leonor Ruivio, *Global Activities*
Esther Sifuma, *Courses and Workshops*
Julie Sollier, *Scientific Affairs*
Maria Polychronidou, *Membership and Courses and Workshops*
Bernd Pulverer, *EMBO Press*
Rosy Szymanski, *Membership*
Daniele Viarisio, *Fellowship Programme*
Gerlind Wallon, *Young Investigator Network*
Fiona Watt, *Director*

11. ANNEX II: Poll results from the workshop

Research outputs: Part 1 – Publications in journals and preprints

Question	Yes	No	Need further discussion
Shall first authorship remain an eligibility criterion for Fellowship applicants?	29	1	0
Shall last authorship remain an eligibility criterion for Young Investigator Network applicants?	25	4	1
Shall we require Fellowship applicants to describe their role in the listed publications?	27	1	3
Shall we continue to require Young Investigator Network applicants to describe their role in the listed publications?	31	1	0
Shall we limit the number of publications that applicants can list?	13	12	7
Shall we remove journal names from applications?	4	27	0

Question	3	5	10	Other/ depends on the scheme	N/A
If you answered yes to limiting publications, what would be the maximum number of publications?	0	9	5	4	14

Research outputs: Part 2 – Other research outputs

Question	Yes, as evaluation criteria	Yes, as eligibility criteria	Yes, as both eligibility and evaluation criteria	No	Need further discussion
Shall we consider research outputs other than publications in our schemes? (e.g. open datasets, protocols, methods, code, software, patents)?	20	0	3	4	4

Question	Yes	No	Need further discussion
If other research outputs are considered, should their quality be formally assessed? (e.g. through usage, impact, or peer assessment)	21	3	7

Contextual diversity: Geography

Question	Yes	No	Need further discussion
Shall we implement further initiatives to increase geographical diversity in EMBO funding schemes?	20	2	8

If you answered yes, which additional initiatives could be considered? (e.g. targeted outreach, eligibility adjustments, capacity-building measures)	Answers given
	Eligibility adjustments
	Increasing participation scheme
	Targeted outreach to institutions
	Targeted outreach to individual researchers
	Eligibility period prolongation
	Targeted outreach, visits by EMBO Members
	Extending eligibility to 6 years for Young Investigator Programme rather than 4 years after starting their lab
	Cut funding period for US applications
	Filter out evaluators of the same country of origin and destination to avoid conflict of interest
	Promoting more candidates to interview stage
	Using successful candidates as local ambassadors

Academic age

Questions	Yes	No	Need more discussion
Is it still appropriate to use the start of an independent position as the reference point for academic age?	18	2	1
Shall we instead consider academic age as the number of years since PhD completion (e.g. a maximum of 9 years)?	8	12	1
Shall we harmonise the definition of academic age across the Young Investigator Network?	5	9	7

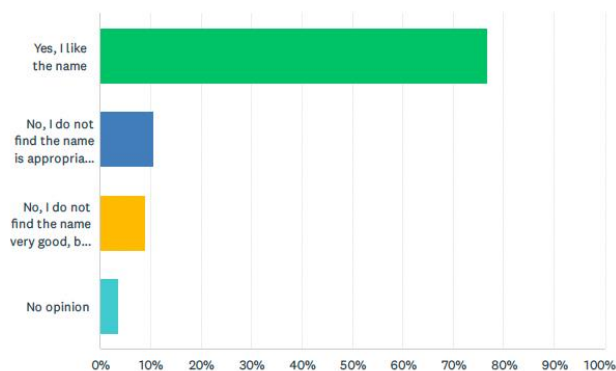
Question	No	Yes, EMBO Investigator Programme	Yes, EMBO Early Career Investigators	Yes, other
Shall we change the name of the programme?	10	3	5	3

12. ANNEX III: 2025 Survey of Young Investigator Network

Current Young Investigators

Q38 How do you feel about the name of the programme? Is the term "young investigator" appropriate for the target group?

Answered: 56 Skipped: 25

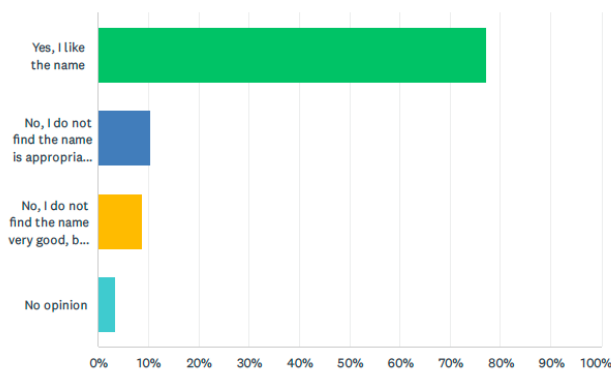


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Yes, I like the name	76.79% 43
No, I do not find the name is appropriate any longer and it should be changed (please comment below)	10.71% 6
No, I do not find the name very good, but do not think that it should be changed	8.93% 5
No opinion	3.57% 2
TOTAL	56

Former Young Investigators

Q39 How do you feel about the name of the programme? Is the term "young investigator" appropriate for the target group?

Answered: 57 Skipped: 48



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Yes, I like the name	77.19% 44
No, I do not find the name is appropriate any longer and should be changed (please comment below)	10.53% 6
No, I do not find the name very good, but do not think that it should be changed	8.77% 5
No opinion	3.51% 2
TOTAL	57

13. ANNEX IV: References

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