This project has received co-funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement n. 101260463.

Marie Sklodowska-Curie Actions COFUND

InterACT

2026-2031

CALL 2026

Guide for Applicants

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I. INTRODUCTION

I.1 InterACT – EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BROADER CHALLENGE

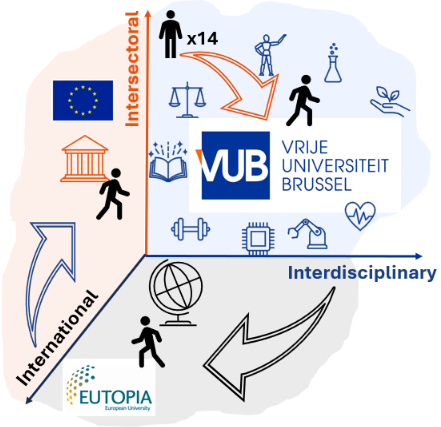
In a world characterized by geopolitical conflicts and pressing global challenges (e.g. pandemic preparedness), scientific collaborations need to overcome borders and established practices. To successfully address complex issues, the path forward lies in interdisciplinary, intersectoral, and international partnerships that transcend the boundaries of specialized (academic) knowledge. Importantly, insights and findings from scientific research need to effectively reach stakeholders (including policy-makers) in order to create tangible societal impact. Achieving these goals is difficult because: 1) despite the urgent need for more interdisciplinarity in research, postdoctoral researchers frequently work in isolation; and 2) science-policy collaborations are hindered by non-overlapping objectives and timeframes, even though evidence-based policy-making is a key resource for governments.

OVERALL AMBITION AND OBJECTIVES

Within this context, our programme InterACT will deliver 14 postdoctoral researchers equipped with the necessary expertise and skills to carry out high-quality projects that bridge disciplinary gaps, involve stakeholders from different sectors in co-creation mechanisms, and set up international collaborations. InterACT will last for 5 years and involve 2 calls for 3-year projects, 2 secondments per project, and final panels where fellows will present the policy briefs based on their findings to a jury of stakeholders.

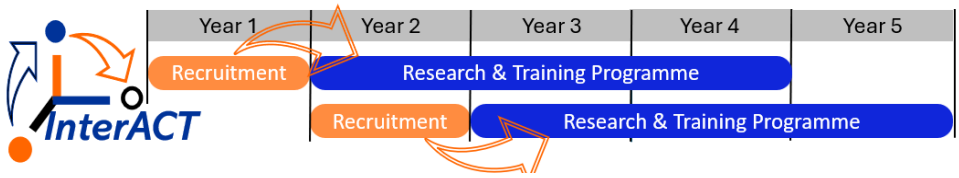
The 3 **specific programme objectives** are:

- To foster excellent postdoctoral research that involves non-academic stakeholders in the research cycle;
- To stimulate a EU-wide collaborative research environment;
- To strengthen ties between different disciplines, paving the way for innovation and creative ideas.



InterACT also has a cross-cutting objective, which is **to foster the future employability of postdoctoral researchers through training activities on transversal skills**.

To achieve its objectives, InterACT will rely on the following intermediate steps: (1) recruitment of postdoctoral researchers to work on 3-year interdisciplinary projects; (2) dedicated training activities based on the "Science for Policy" competence framework and on key transversal skills; (3) dedicated training on the production of policy briefs; (4) international and intersectoral secondments of minimum 3 months for co-creation activities; and (5) final panel discussion with stakeholders from academia, industry, government and civil society.



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VUB AND COLLABORATORS

The implementation of the InterACT research and training programme is realized by:

- *Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB)* developing, implementing and managing the programme, recruiting the 14 postdoctoral researchers in an open competition, taking into account gender equality and diversity, and employing the selected fellows over a 3-year period.
- *Belgian non-academic organizations* (e.g., NGOs, companies, government authorities, Civil Society Organizations, etc.) which will host the fellows over a period of 3-5 months. This secondment is meant to boost the applied impact of the project.
- *International academic organizations* which agree to host the fellows over a period of 3-5 months. The fellows will choose international academic groups conducting research in a field different from theirs in order to boost the interdisciplinarity of their projects.

EXPECTED IMPACT

The expected impact of the programme will be measured and observable at researcher, organization, and EU level.

At researchers' level:

- expanded and diversified career pathways;
- impact-driven mindset;
- new networks outside of academia;
- new international and interdisciplinary networks; broad range of transversal skills acquired and/or developed.

At organisation level:

- growth in research talent attracted;
- expansion of postdoctoral training offer;
- strengthened international HR practices;
- higher international recognition;
- boost in number of industry-academia collaborations; higher visibility in EU, Brussels, and Flemish institutions;
- stronger community engagement;
- strengthened international collaborations (e.g. within the EUTOPIA alliance).

At EU level:

- strengthened EU-wide HR practices protecting the mental and physical well-being of researchers;
- contribution to the European Charter for Researchers;
- support to balanced international "brain circulation";
- strengthened European Research Area and contribution to the European Research Area Policy Agenda;
- increased access to high-quality scientific knowledge for policy-making;
- increased competitiveness in the area of innovations with societal impact.

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I.2 CALL 2026 – First call in InterACT

- Opening of the call: 1st September 2026
- Deadline of the call: **8 January 2027 @ 17h00 CET**
- Eligibility check: week 2 and week 3 in January 2027
- Evaluation: from 25th January 2027 until 30th April 2027
- Information to applicants: first half of May 2027
- Start of projects: at the latest by 31 August 2027

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II. ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

Applications from all fields of science are welcome, but the candidates must respect a number of eligibility rules.

Only **1 application per candidate** is allowed. In case of multiple applications from the same candidate, only the first submitted application will be considered.

European disqualifying eligibility conditions

- The candidates have to meet the rule of international mobility, which implies that the candidates cannot have resided or carried out their main activity (work, studies, etc.) in Belgium for more than 12 months in the 36 months before the call deadline (i.e., 8 January 2027). IMPORTANT: time spent as part of a procedure for obtaining refugee status under the Geneva Convention or EU temporary protection, compulsory national service and/or short stays such as holidays are not taken into account for calculating the 12 months.
- At the date of the call deadline, the candidates must be in possession of a doctoral degree. Researchers who have successfully defended their doctoral thesis but who have not yet formally been awarded the doctoral degree will also be considered as postdoctoral researchers and will be eligible to apply. The successful defense must be unconditional (no further requirements/corrections that need to be addressed) and take place before the call deadline. Supporting documentation from your PhD institution will be requested. **In case your proposal is selected for funding, you need to have an awarded PhD degree before the start of your contract at VUB.**
- The candidates cannot already have a permanent employment contract with VUB.

Belgian disqualifying eligibility conditions

- At the start of the employment contract with VUB, the postdoctoral researcher cannot have any other contract with another organization.

Disqualifying eligibility conditions at programme level

A full application must contain:

- the applicant's CV;
- a scanned copy of the applicant's doctoral degree or document confirming successful defense of the thesis;
- the completed main application template outlining the 3-year research project;
- a letter of commitment from a VUB supervisor; and
- a completed ethics checklist.

The management committee will analyze the completeness and administrative correctness of the application. Non-compliance with one or more of these eligibility criteria listed above will lead to exclusion from the evaluation process.

Please note that VUB supervisors cannot contribute to the writing of the application. Assistance from the supervisor with the writing of the application is strictly prohibited and will lead to the exclusion of the proposal. Applicants should write their InterACT proposal without any input from their prospective supervisors.

Non-disqualifying eligibility conditions at programme level

- (Optional, but highly recommended) the applicant should include a letter of commitment from a Belgian non-academic organization.
- In case of applications exceeding the maximum number of pages determined in the application template (i.e., 10 pages including references), the management committee will delete all excess pages prior to sending the application to the independent experts for the evaluation.

All application documents need to be submitted in **English**, with the exception of the PhD certificate, which can be submitted in the original language.

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III. SUBMISSION OF APPLICATIONS

III.1 APPLICATION PLATFORM

We welcome applications from all fields of science.

Applications must be submitted online through the dedicated platform that is accessible on the InterACT website (https://interact-programme.be/apply). Applications sent via other means (e-mail, post, etc.) will not be considered.

It is the responsibility of the applicant to submit the application on time in order to avoid last-minute delays due to the expected high number of submissions. The submission platform will be automatically deactivated at precisely 17:00 CET on Friday, January 8th 2027. No applications will be accepted after the submission deadline, unless technical issues in the submission platform occurred. In this case applicants will be notified accordingly.

III.2 MAIN APPLICATION FORM

The main application form needs to be **downloaded from the InterACT website** and completed in all its parts. The application form will be divided into the three key sections of Excellence, Impact, and Implementation. The maximum length allowed is **10 pages**.

The detailed structure of the application form is:

I. EXCELLENCE
- I.1 Introduction and Objectives
- I.2 Concept
- I.3 Research methodology
- I.4 Interdisciplinarity
- I.5 Co-creation

II. IMPACT
- II.1 Expected impact on applicant's career
- II.2 Measures to maximise impact
- II.3 Expected societal impact

III. IMPLEMENTATION
- III.1 Work plan
- III.2 Identified VUB-research group in which the applicant will carry out their project
- III.3 Identified or proposed non-academic organization for secondment **(please note: this section is obligatory regardless of whether a letter of commitment has already been secured or not).**

Formatting: margins of at least 1.5 cm (top, bottom, left and right), font size of at least 10 pt, line spacing of at least 1.0, readable font (preferably Calibri or Times New Roman). References may be inserted as footnotes in a smaller font provided that they are legible.

IMPORTANT: It is highly recommended that applicants read carefully the information in Annex I and Annex II below before preparing their application. The Annexes will help the candidates identify the key training/career development/outreach outcomes of the InterACT programme.

III.3 OTHER APPLICATION DOCUMENTS

- CV of the applicant: free format; you can use a template of choice; maximum 5 pages.
- Scanned copy of PhD certificate (no translation required at this stage) or official institutional confirmation that PhD defense has taken place and that no corrections of the thesis are required;
- Letter of commitment from VUB supervisor: letter template to be downloaded from the InterACT website, completed, and signed. The template can be edited as necessary.
  On the InterACT website (https://interact-programme.be/vub-supervisor), you will find a list of VUB supervisors who have already agreed to supervise fellows working in specific areas. You are welcome to contact them if your research area matches, but you may also contact other VUB supervisors who are not listed on the website.
- (Optional, but highly recommended) Letter of commitment from a Belgian non-academic organization: letter template to be downloaded from the InterACT website, edited (if necessary), completed, and signed.
  On the InterACT website (https://interact-programme.be/non-academic-organizations), you will find a list of non-academic organizations which have already agreed to host fellows working in specific areas. You are welcome to contact them if your research area matches, but you can also contact other Belgian non-academic organizations who are not listed on the website.
- Ethics checklist: to be downloaded from the InterACT website and completed.

III.4 SUBMISSION PROCESS

In the dedicated application platform on the InterACT website, the applicants will need to upload all requested documents in PDF format:

- the applicant's CV
- a scanned copy of the applicant's doctoral degree or official institutional document confirming successful defense of the thesis
- the completed main application template outlining the 3-year research project
- a letter of commitment from a VUB supervisor
- (optional) a letter of commitment from a non-academic organization
- a completed ethics checklist

III.5 Use of AI

To regulate the use of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, the InterACT programme adopts the same guidelines on AI use as those of the EU Commission.

When considering the use of AI tools for the preparation of the proposal, it is imperative to exercise caution and careful consideration. The AI-generated content should be thoroughly reviewed and validated by the applicants to ensure its appropriateness and accuracy, as well as its compliance with intellectual property regulations. Applicants are fully responsible for the content of the proposal (even those parts produced by the AI tool) and must be transparent in disclosing which AI tools were used and how they were utilized.

Specifically, applicants are required to:

- Verify the accuracy, validity, and appropriateness of the content and any citations generated by the AI tool and correct any errors or inconsistencies.

- Provide a list of sources used to generate content and citations, including those generated by the AI tool. Double-check citations to ensure they are accurate and properly referenced.

- Be conscious of the potential for plagiarism where the AI tool may have reproduced substantial text from other sources. Check the original sources to be sure you are not plagiarizing someone else's work.

- Acknowledge the limitations of the AI tool in the proposal preparation, including the potential for bias, errors, and gaps in knowledge.

Please note that the use of hidden prompts aimed at influencing the evaluation process will make your proposal inadmissible.

IV. EVALUATION PROCESS

The evaluation process will take place over a period of 4 months, following a number of steps.

IV.1 ELIGIBILITY CHECKS

During the first 2 weeks of the evaluation process, the InterACT Selection & Management Committee (ISMC) will perform an eligibility check of all applications by checking their completeness.
Applications that do not meet the eligibility criteria will be discarded and the applicants will be informed immediately.
For applications that might pose serious ethical risks, the ISMC might contact the candidates to ask for clarifications and/or contact the VUB Ethics Committee for advice. If a candidate project might pose a threat to human safety or dignity, the application will be deemed ineligible.
If the description of the project is longer than 10 pages, the excess pages will be made blank before being sent for evaluation.

IV.2 EVALUATORS

The ISMC will contact experts from academia, industry, civil society, and government to act as independent evaluators from 3 broad expertise areas corresponding to the three evaluation panels: (1) Humanities & Social Sciences; (2) Life Sciences; (3) Physical & Engineering Sciences. The decision to include evaluators from both within and outside academia is in line with the strong focus on stakeholder engagement and societal impact of the InterACT programme. The ISMC will also strive to set up a pool of evaluators which is balanced in terms of expertise, gender, and geographical spread. Experts that accept to be evaluators will be asked to sign a contract detailing their rights and obligations (e.g. confidentiality obligations), including confirming that they will notify the ISMC immediately in case of conflicts of interest that might hinder the fairness and impartiality of the evaluation. Furthermore, evaluators will be introduced to unconscious bias and given guidelines on how to avoid it. For every application, evaluators will receive: (1) the proposal to be read and evaluated; (2) the evaluation template to be completed; (3) the guidelines for experts. The guidelines for experts will inform them of the phases in the evaluation procedure, present a series of do's and don'ts, and describe the scoring procedure and the meaning of the scores.

IV.3 EVALUATION CRITERIA

The table below shows the criteria that evaluators will be asked to consider:

I. EXCELLENCE. Threshold 3.5/5, weight in overall score 40%	**SCORE**	**X.X/5**
▪ Soundness of the objectives. Comment on the objectives reflecting the aim of the research project; are they quantified and measurable and do they show a clear step beyond the state of the art? ▪ Is the concept innovative and discussed against the state of the art, is it timely? ▪ Quality of the research methodology. Are the methods clearly described? Will the proposed methods allow the researcher to achieve the project's objectives? Is the methodology feasible within the 3-year framework of this project and is it well linked with the work packages and tasks discussed in section 3.1? ▪ Is the project interdisciplinary and is the value of bringing together disciplines clearly outlined? ▪ Is it clear what co-creation will entail and who are the stakeholders involved? Will co-creation activities bring significant value to the project?		
II. IMPACT. Threshold 4.0/5, weight in overall score 40%	**SCORE**	**X.X/5**
▪ Is it clear and convincing how this fellowship will benefit the researcher's career in the academic and non-academic sector? ▪ Quality of the dissemination proposed and its expected impact. ▪ Quality of the exploitation proposed and its expected impact. ▪ Will the project have substantial societal impact in the short-, medium-, and long-term, including on policy-making? Are the identified target groups, scale, and significance of impact realistic?		
III. IMPLEMENTATION. Threshold 3.5/5, weight in overall score 20%	**SCORE**	**X.X/5**
▪ Quality of the work plan, its structure, logical approach, interrelationship between the WPs ▪ Quality of the WPs and tasks described. ▪ Clear, relevant and measurable deliverables and milestones defined? ▪ Quality of the selected research group at VUB in terms of relevant expertise and resources. Is the research group a good fit for the project? ▪ Quality of the selected non-academic institution for the intersectoral secondment. Will this secondment make a convincing contribution to the project?		

As can be seen, for each of the 3 evaluation criteria (Excellence, Impact, Implementation) the ISMC will provide questions to guide the evaluators towards the aspects (sub-criteria) that deserve most attention. Evaluators will be instructed to identify both strengths and weaknesses for each criterium and to provide a score between 0 and 5, with 5.0 being excellent; 4.5-4.9 being very good (minor weaknesses); 4.0-4.4 being good (moderate weaknesses); 3.5-3.9 being acceptable (one major weakness + possibly other weaknesses); and below 3.5 being non-acceptable (major weaknesses or missing parts in the proposal).

IV.4 INDIVIDUAL EVALUATION PHASE

During this phase, each proposal will be evaluated by three independent experts individually, without interaction. Each expert will produce an Individual Evaluation Report by completing the form shown in Section IV.3, evaluating the three criteria of Excellence, Impact, and Implementation. After the assigned ISMC member receives an Individual Evaluation Report, they will check the form for completeness and appropriateness (e.g. ensuring that there are no offensive or discriminatory comments), copy the scores into the Excel master file, and make an initial calculation based on the weight of each evaluation criterion (for information on the weight of each criterion see Section IV.6).

IV.5 CONSENSUS PHASE

After the assigned ISMC member receives the three independent Individual Evaluation Reports, he/she prepares a Draft Consensus Report. This document combines the comments on strengths and weaknesses given by the 3 evaluators — overlapping comments are merged and contradictory comments are highlighted for follow-up discussion. The Draft Consensus Report will be sent to the evaluators via email, seeking to resolve contradictions in writing. If that is not possible, the assigned ISMC member will organise an online meeting to discuss contradictory views of the proposal and to reach an agreement. If an agreement is not possible, a 4th independent expert will be invited to review the proposal and to make a final decision. Once the agreement on strengths and weaknesses is reached through online discussions, the evaluators will agree on the final scores for the three evaluation criteria of Excellence, Impact, and Implementation. The ISMC member then prepares a Final Consensus Report, in which all contradictory comments are solved and the scores are consistently justified by the evaluators' comments on strengths and weaknesses.

IV.6 FINAL EVALUATION PHASE

The completion of the evaluation process involves three tasks.

1) Ranking: The Final Consensus Reports with the final scores will be used to prepare the final ranking based on overall scores. Each of the 3 evaluation criteria (namely, Excellence, Impact, and Implementation) will have a final score from 0 to 5, and will have a different weight in the calculation of the overall score. The overall score will be a percentage: Excellence and Impact will each count for 40% (scores multiplied by 8), and Implementation for 20% (scores multiplied by 4). For instance, an application with a final score of 4 in Excellence, 5 in Impact, and 3 in Implementation, would get an overall score of 84% (i.e., (4 X 8) + (5 X 8) + (3 X 4)). The list of priority criteria determining the elimination of ex aequo cases looks as follows:

- Highest consensus score on Impact;
- Highest consensus score on Excellence;
- Gender of the applicant (non-binary > women > men);
- Country origin (maximizing geographical diversity).

In order to ensure high standards of quality, the ISMC will set a quality threshold for each of the 3 evaluation criteria (i.e., 3.5 for Excellence, 4 for Impact, and 3.5 for Implementation). A higher threshold for Impact is motivated by the strong focus of the InterACT programme on societal impact. Proposals which, after reaching the consensus phase, score under the threshold for even one of the three criteria will be automatically rejected. The ISMC will prepare 3 different ranking lists (one for each panel: Physical & Engineering Sciences, Life Sciences, Humanities & Social Sciences). For this call, **7 positions will be available**: 2 for each panel, plus 1 additional position assigned to the panel with the highest number of applications. Candidates with the highest overall scores in these rankings will be offered the position. For each panel, an equivalent number of proposals will be placed on the reserve list (2 for each of the three panels, plus 1 additional proposal for the panel with the highest number of applications) in case one or more of the winning applicants does not accept the position. The remaining proposals will be considered as rejected.

2) Notification of applicants: As soon as the rankings are finalised, the ISMC will inform the candidates about the outcome of the selection process. Each candidate will receive the Final Consensus Report for their proposal and be informed via e-mail if their proposal is approved, rejected, or in the reserve list. The 7 successful candidates for each call will be invited to join VUB as postdoctoral researchers under an employment contract as part of the InterACT programme. They will be given a deadline to confirm their acceptance of the position. In case of a positive answer, the official VUB onboarding procedure will begin in collaboration with the HR Department. In case of a negative answer, the ISMC will contact the first person on the reserve list. This process will continue until the position is filled.

3) Redress cases: Candidates who do not agree with the outcome of the evaluation process will have 14 days to appeal the final decision. They should contact the ISMC via email (contact@interact-programme.be), provide their motivation for appealing, and include evidence to support their claims. Please note: **a redress case will be considered only when it addresses procedural errors in the selection process** (e.g., considering ineligible a proposal that met all the eligibility requirements). Redress cases will not be considered when they address the comments of the evaluators, since the ISMC relies on the merits of the independent experts. Redress cases which are based on legitimate claims will result in a second round of evaluations and, if the proposal ranks among the highest, VUB internal funds will be used to cover the costs of the extra position.

IV.7 FAIRNESS & TRANSPARENCY

Guided by humanist values, VUB embraces diversity, rejects inequalities, and holds the HRs4R label (Human Resources Strategy for Researchers). The InterACT programme will also abide by the same principles of (gender) equality and diversity to attract and retain diverse talents and

impactful projects from various backgrounds. The selection procedure will be open, transparent, merit-based, impartial and equitable as set out in the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers and in the new European Charter for Researchers.
During the selection process, no restrictions will be adopted based on ethnicity, race, religion, age, gender, disability, socio-economic condition, or sexual orientation. The evaluators will be informed about the no-restriction principle and the ISMC members will closely monitor the evaluation reports to ensure that comments on strengths and weaknesses are based purely on factual elements of the content of the proposals. The ISMC will also ensure that, during the selection process, career breaks and periods of inactivity (such as maternity/paternity leave, inactivity due to illness, or a career move outside research) do not have a negative impact on the evaluation of the proposals.

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V. RECRUITMENT CONDITIONS

The InterACT postdoctoral researchers will be recruited under an employment contract with full or partial social security coverage (including sickness, parental, unemployment and invalidity benefits, pension rights, benefits in respect of accidents at work and occupational diseases), in line with the Belgian legislation. Each researcher will receive:

- total gross salary of €4,700 per month (net salaries will vary depending on the fellow's specific conditions);
- reimbursement of all visa-related costs (if any);
- €300 monthly as mobility allowance for their relocation to Belgium;
- travel ticket to and from Brussels reimbursed up to a maximum of €500;
- free-of-charge participation in all the InterACT programme's obligatory training activities and events, as well as full reimbursement for the costs associated with the secondments (accommodation, travel);
- research costs, including open access fees, conference registrations, and conference trips, will be funded by the hosting VUB research group.

On top of the above, everyone with an employment contract or a scholarship agreement is automatically insured starting their first workday. This 'hospitalisation insurance' covers the following: hospitalisation costs; costs linked to outpatient treatment of serious illnesses (UZ Brussel and VUB services); outpatient concerns (UZ Brussel and VUB services). This insurance is cost-free for staff members themselves. It is possible for family members to pay to join (children are included at a reduced rate of 5.5 euros per child and adults at a rate of 11 euros). You can continue the insurance after retirement. Please note: you will need to pay a small amount for a basic health coverage which is compulsory in Belgium. In Belgium, this compulsory insurance is a nearly universal system of basic insurance coverage that covers a large part of your medical expenses, such as a doctor's visit, hospitalisation (operations, treatments) and certain other medical services. The payment of various benefits (sickness, incapacity for work, maternity, etc.) is also included.

The researchers will also receive 35 vacation days per year, plus 3 extra days off, and the university will be closed between Christmas and New Year. Additionally, in Belgium, there are 10 official festive days which are also paid (some of them fall within the closure period of VUB). Please note that exact vacation days will be calculated based on your date of employment. Children of employees (from 3 to 15 years of age) can avail of tax-deductible Sports and Project Camps on the campus in Ixelles and Jette in the Easter and summer holidays. VUB gives employees a discount of 8 euro per day.

Fellows will receive eco-cheques (€ 240 per academic year for full-time employment). The fellows will also be entitled to a home working allowance of 60 euros net (or an Internet allowance if they cannot work from home), reimbursement of public transport commuting, free parking on VUB premises, and an extensive range of employee discounts on selected brands. Fellows who cycle to campus are entitled to a bicycle allowance of €0.36 per kilometer, for which they can apply once a year.

On campus the researchers have access to affordable medical assistance (doctors, physiotherapists, psychologists, and dentists with coverage by hospitalisation insurance in the case of outpatient care); a restaurant with competitive prices; and a BasicFit gym (including swimming pool and a broad range of facilities) with discounted prices. Finally, near the campus in Ixelles and on the campus in Jette, there is a day care centre for children from 0 to 3 years offering places to VUB staff members. Please note that the day care itself is not free of charge and a free spot is not guaranteed.

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VI. CONTACT

Questions related to the application procedure?

Please contact the InterACT Scientific and Management Team at: contact@interact-programme.be

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Annex 1: InterACT training programme

Quality, novelty and pertinence of the research training programme

InterACT's training programme is designed to equip researchers with the versatility, adaptability, and confidence required in today's dynamic and complex landscape. By focusing on interdisciplinary, intersectoral, and international collaboration, we ensure that research projects not only advance academic knowledge but also address societal challenges effectively. A core aspect of InterACT is the **emphasis on the valorization of research**, which traditionally focuses on economic impact. However, this project redefines valorization to prioritize societal impact in its different forms, ensuring that the benefits of research are brought back to society. This approach also recognizes the significant contributions of the social sciences and humanities, which are often overlooked in traditional valorization frameworks. Translating research into social value involves co-creation activities that bridge disciplinary gaps by integrating diverse perspectives and methodologies. It engages stakeholders from academia, industry, government, and the community to ensure research relevance, enhancing research impact by addressing specific societal needs, building trust and mutual learning among participants, and sustaining long-term collaborations to continuously address complex challenges. Within this context, the main goal of InterACT is to enhance the future employability of postdoctoral researchers through dedicated training activities, by focusing on three specific training objectives (TO):

TO1: Interdisciplinary objective: Strengthen interdisciplinary connections to foster innovation and creative ideas. Breaking down academic silos will enable researchers to understand the broader implications of their work, integrate diverse perspectives and enhance the overall impact of research. Specifically, the fellows will: (i) Submit a research topic that combines two disciplines; (ii) Be integrated in one of the research groups at VUB; (iii) Choose an international group from another discipline to co-develop their research.

TO2: Intersectoral objective: Ensure the effective communication and collaboration between the scientific community and external stakeholders (governments/policymakers, citizens, and companies). This is crucial for translating scientific insights and findings into actionable policies and practices that address pressing societal challenges. By engaging stakeholders early and regularly in the research cycle, the postdoctoral fellows will be able to shape research projects so that they are aligned with stakeholders' needs, thereby maximizing the impact and acceptance of research outputs. For this, fellows will:

- Follow an intersectoral secondment of 3-5 months in Year 1 with a non-academic stakeholder (NGO, company, governmental institution…) relevant for their research project.
- Communicate with this non-academic stakeholder throughout the program (min. 1 online interaction per month) and invite them at the end of the program to be part of the final discussion panel.
- Present their research findings at the end of the programme in the form of a policy brief to an intersectoral panel from members of the civil society, industry, and government. Each fellow will be asked to consider the implications of their projects for EU, national, or regional policies.
- Receive training in transversal skills, which will boost the career prospects of the postdocs in the non-academic sector.

TO3: International objective: Promote an EU-wide collaborative research environment to expand the career opportunities of early-stage researchers. By fostering international partnerships, we aim to create a diverse and inclusive research community that tackles complex global issues through a unified approach. Therefore, fellows will: (i) Choose an international group from another discipline to co-develop their research. The use of the European partners of the EUTOPIA network will be strongly encouraged; (ii) Do an international secondment in this co-hosting group, for a period of 3-5 months during Year 2; (iii) Communicate regularly with their co-hosting group throughout the program (minimum 1 online interaction per month) and invite them at the end of the program to be part of the panel.

Overview and content structure of the postdoctoral training programme

The InterACT programme will train fellows on transversal skills and policy-making, while also further advancing their research skills. The foreseen training activities will be informed by: (i) the successful training offer developed during the MSCA COFUND H2020 imπACT programme — to this end, we have selected the training sessions which were appreciated the most by our imπACT fellows; and (2) by the **"Science4Policy" competence framework**[1]. In particular, the latter mentions the importance of: (1) Understanding policy: fellows will gain insights into the structure, processes, and dynamics of policy development, enabling them to comprehend the policy landscape relevant to their research. (2) Participating in policy making: training will equip fellows with the skills to engage actively in policy formulation, influencing decisions that impact their fields of study. (3) Communicating with stakeholders: emphasis will be placed on effective communication strategies to disseminate research findings

[1] Schwendiger, F., Topp, L., and Kovacs, V. (2022). Competences for policymaking: Competence frameworks for policymakers and researchers working on public policy. *JRC Science for Policy Report.* doi:10.2760/642121

to diverse audiences, including policymakers, stakeholders, and the public. (4) Engaging with citizens and stakeholders: fellows will learn techniques for involving citizens and stakeholders in the research process, ensuring that their work addresses real-world needs and concerns. (5) Collaborating: the programme will foster collaborative skills, encouraging interdisciplinary and cross-sector partnerships to enhance the scope and impact of research projects. Furthermore, the fellows will receive training on additional **transversal skills**, namely: open science practices, project management, gender perspectives in research, work-life balance, IP management, social entrepreneurship, setting up collaborations, creative problem solving, leadership, EU grant writing.

The fellows will also attend **thematic sessions** on current societal challenges relevant to all of their projects: (1) The use of Artificial Intelligence (AI): this session will explore the ethical, social, and technical implications of AI, discussing its potential to transform various sectors and its associated risks. (2) Societal inequalities: fellows will examine the root causes and consequences of societal inequalities, with a focus on how research can inform policies and practices aimed at reducing disparities.

InterACT fellows will also receive **training by research**. In addition to gaining interdisciplinary expertise, the postdocs will also become familiar with co-creation techniques thanks to the involvement of external stakeholders in their projects. In InterACT, we define co-creation as collaboration that can take place among stakeholders across all research phases (from problem identification and to research design, up to post-evaluation)[2]. Based on the timeline foreseen for the intersectoral secondments, we expect the co-creation activities to mainly address the data collection (methods), data analysis, and reporting phases of the postdocs' projects. In some cases, it is possible that the input of external stakeholders might lead to a slight revision of the initial project objectives. Rather than avoiding this situation, this outcome will be considered a desirable result of the project provided that: 1) the fellows and the rest of the supervisory committee agree with the changes; 2) the changes do not render the project unfeasible from the point of view of timing and resources. By the end of the programme, the 14 postdocs will have gained the ability to consider, accommodate, and negotiate stakeholders' needs into existing projects, an ability which is increasingly needed nowadays as work environments become highly collaborative.

Structure of training offer:

Welcome and onboarding: At the start of the programme, a welcome kick-off event will bring together all InterACT fellows, their supervisors, the InterACT management team, and future trainers. This one-day event will include an onboarding session during which the fellows will be introduced to the structure, regulations, and expectations (e.g. deliverables, acknowledgement of funding, open access publications) of the InterACT programme, as well as to the general VUB's functioning. On the same day, all fellows will present their projects in an elevator pitch format and receive questions from their peers. Subsequently, an initial workshop on societal impact of research (i.e., the key theme of the programme) will take place. The day will end with a networking session to enhance group cohesion. **In-person training weeks:** During Year 1 and Year 2, the fellows will participate in training weeks covering transversal skills and thematic sessions. The idea of organising training weeks comes from the MSCA COFUND H2020 imπACT programme. Due to its success, the ISMC will replicate them with a new focus for the InterACT programme. The ISMC will select key internal and external leaders and experts to deliver the training sessions. It is important to note that the ISMC can already count on an established and reliable network of trainers that were recruited during the prior imπACT programme. These in-person sessions help create and maintain group cohesion and engagement. **Online thematic trainings:** During Year 1 and Year 2, fellows can access online training on the EU institutions and EU decision-making, as well as an online elective course chosen by each fellow (EU Foreign and Security Policy; EU Environmental Policy; EU Migration Policy; EU Policy on Digital Platforms and Algorithm; EU Economic Policy), allowing them to follow training comfortably during their secondments. **Policy workshop:** During Year 3, there will be a policy workshop divided into 2 modules: an in-person hands-on workshop on how to write their research into a policy brief, and an exercise with mock panel consisting of other fellow to whom they will present their policy brief and prepare for the final panel assessment. **Panel presentation:** At the end of the programme, fellows will present their science-based policy briefs to a panel of at least five jury members, including representatives from academia, industry, government, and civil society. The panel will provide feedback on the policy briefs. **Final event:** A closing event will be organized for the fellows to present their projects and share their main takeaways from the programme. The supervisors will be invited to this event.

In addition to these formalised and structured training activities, the postdocs will be trained via the **two secondments** foreseen in the 3-year projects: **Intersectoral secondments:** During Year 1, fellows will carry out a 3-5 month stay in a non-academic institution of their choice, with the condition that it is relevant for their research project. This could include institutions and organizations in Brussels, such as the European Commission, Brussels-based NGOs, or research-oriented companies, as well as citizens' groups engaged in societal issues. The placement

[2] Messiha, K. et al. (2023). Systematic review of contemporary theories used for co-creation, co-design and co-production in public health. *Journal of Public Health*, 45(3), pp. 723-737.

of the InterACT programme in Brussels, the de-facto capital of Europe, will facilitate access to these institutions. The fellows will be able to indicate their non-academic institution of choice at the moment of proposal submission. **International secondments:** During Year 2, fellows will do a 3-5 month stay at a co-host institution abroad, preferably within the EUTOPIA network. Other international universities can be selected, as long as they have received the HRS4R label and can guarantee fair and adequate working conditions. The collaboration of the InterACT researchers with international partners will allow the fellows to access leading universities and top-notch research centres. During this stay, the fellows will work in a different discipline or field that complements their research project, thus benefiting from exposure to diverse perspectives and methodologies. Fellows will maintain regular communication with their secondment groups through monthly online or in-person meetings. These groups will also participate in the final feedback panel for the policy briefs, ensuring continued collaboration and input throughout the programme.

Main Network-Wide Training Events, Conferences and Contribution of the Beneficiary/Partners

	Main Training Events & Conferences	Lead Institution	Action Month (*estimated*)
1	Welcome event and onboarding; elevator pitch from fellows; workshop "Achieving societal impact" (trainer: AESIS); networking.	VUB	M13
2	In-person training week: ***Transversal skills:*** "IP management" (trainer: Hugo Loosvelt, VUB); "Open science and data management" (trainer: Flora D'Anna, VIB); "Gender dimension & gender perspective in research" (trainer: Katrien Van der Heyden, Oxfam); "Work-life balance" (trainer: Kim Hilgert, Tryangle); "Project management" (trainer: Filip Janssens, D-NA); "Social entrepreneurship" (trainer: Stefan Chichevaliev, VUB). ***Thematic session*:** AI for the Common Good (trainer: FARI, VUB).	VUB	M15
3	Online thematic training: "EU institutions" (Elie Perot, VUB).	VUB	M18-M21
4	In-person training week: ***Transversal skills:*** "EU grant writing" (trainer: ERIS team, VUB); "Setting up win-win collaborations" (trainer: Piet Verhoeve, Origanius); "Pitching and effective communication" (trainer: Arnaud Zonderman, SciMingo); "Leadership" (trainer: Katelijne Callebaut, Loopwise); "Creative problem thinking" (trainer: Carine Chisu, Yeast). ***Thematic session*:** Gender and socio-economic inequalities in the EU: A policy perspective (trainer: Tuba Bircan, VUB).	VUB	M25
5	Online thematic training: "EU decision-making and law" (trainer: Elie Perot, VUB).	VUB	M31-M40
6	Online thematic training: One online elective course of choice on EU policy: EU Foreign and Security Policy; EU Environmental Policy; EU Migration Policy; EU Policy on Digital Platforms and Algorithm; EU Economic Policy.		M37-39
7	Policy workshop of 2 x ½ days	VUB	M40-46
7a	- "How to write a policy brief" (Daniel Fiott, VUB)		
7b	- Mock panel (supervised by Daniel Fiott, VUB).		
8	Panel: presentation of policy brief (organized by InterACT management team).	VUB	M47
9	Final event: Goodbye words from organizers; Final presentations and feedback from the fellows.	VUB	M48



Timeline of the InterACT research & training projects.

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Annex 2: Dissemination, communication, and exploitation plan

Plan for the dissemination and exploitation activities, including communication activities

InterACT's dissemination, communication, and exploitation strategy will operate at both the programme level and the individual postdoc project level, as described in the overview below.

	Programme-Level	Postdoc Project-Level
D	- Matchmaking opportunities through an international and an intersectoral secondment	- High-quality scientific publications - (Inter)national conference presentations
C	- InterACT website - Online presence though social media - Monthly InterACT newsletter - Partnering with *Visit Brussels* to engage with the public - Invite the general public as juries during the final event of InterACT	- News of the postdocs' research and scientific outputs will be posted in InterACT's online channels - Videos summarising the fellow's projects - Participation in public events to share insight of the fellows' projects
E	- Training programme replication - Data Management Plan following FAIR principles - TechTransfer support to identify innovative results and developing an IP portfolio	- Stakeholder engagement via co-creation activities - Policy brief development based on the fellows' research results, presented in front of stakeholders representing the Quadruple Helix

Dissemination measures

The InterACT program has the Dissemination Objective (DO) of **sharing results and insights with the academic/specialised community**. Activities and KPIs to measure their success: **Scientific publications:** Research results will be published in international high-impact, peer-reviewed journals with open access. Each fellow aims to publish at least 2 papers, resulting in a minimum of 28 papers in total. *KPI1.1: ≥ 10 citations per article within 3 years of publication.* **Conferences:** Fellows will present at relevant international conferences, aiming for at least 28 contributions. Specific conference examples cannot be provided as research topics are not yet finalized. *KPI1.2: ≥ 100 attendees per conference.* **International and intersectoral secondment:** Fellows will follow two 3-5 months secondments, one international & interdisciplinary (academic) and one intersectoral to enlarge their network, expanding their opportunities for employability. *KPI1.3: ≥ 6 months seconded outside of VUB per fellow; KPI1.4: ≥ 2 external supervisors engaged with each fellow's project.*

Target groups: International community of academics and researchers in universities and companies; industry, government, and CSO representatives. **Key messages**: Sharing interdisciplinary research findings, attracting future research collaborations, inspiring replication and follow-up studies, and boosting fellow's visibility .

Communication measures

InterACT's Communication Objectives (COs) with tasks and related KPIs:

CO1: To maximize the outreach of the programme and its project results through online presence. **Social media:** Using LinkedIn, X (formerly Twitter), BlueSky, and YouTube to reach stakeholders and create awareness about the research and activities of InterACT. *KPI2.1: ≥ 100 followers on LinkedIn, BlueSky, and X within Y1; KPI2.2: ≥ 250 followers on LinkedIn, BlueSky, and X within Y3; KPI2.3: ≥ 400 followers on LinkedIn, BlueSky, and X within Y5; KPI2.4: ≥ 10 interactions (like and/or reshare) per post; KPI2.5: ≥ 100 subscribers to InterACT YouTube channel by Y5.* **InterACT website:** Featuring general information about InterACT, specific pages for events, project results, dissemination and communication outputs, and a dedicated fellows section. *KPI2.6: ≥ 10 new visitors and 20 returning visitors per month; KPI2.7: ≥ 3-minute reading time per visitor.* **Monthly newsletter:** To announce news, events, and milestones of the programme and the fellows. The link to subscribe to the newsletter will be available on the project website. *KPI2.8: ≥ 10 new newsletter subscribers per month.* **Scientific videos:** Each fellow will develop a short scientific video explaining their project in layman's terms. This activity will result in 14 videos which will be shared on the InterACT YouTube channel, as well as through the communication channels developed in CO1. During the training programme the fellows will receive training in "Pitching and effective communication" to create a compelling pitch. *KPI2.9: ≥ 100 visualisations per video by Y5.*

CO2: To ensure public engagement with the project through dedicated events and activities, such as:

- **Public events:** InterACT will encourage fellows to participate in national and internation public engagement events, such as the *European Researcher's Night* in different EU cities, *Flanders Science Week*, and *Science Is Wonderful!* to engage with the public, improving understanding of science, and promoting research careers. The ISMC will assist fellows in selecting events where the language used is English. To that end, the ISMC can count on experience with the previous MSCA COFUND imπACT fellows, who successfully participated in public engagement events all over Europe. Furthermore, as effective communication will be one of the key skills trained during the programme, the fellows will be prepared to communicate with the lay audience in an accessible and engaging language. Each fellow will participate in at least 1 event, totalling 14 participations. *KPI2.10: ≥ 10 interactions with members of the public per fellow per each event.*

- **Partnering with *Visit Brussels*:** This organization is dedicated to promoting events in the city of Brussels, has provided a letter of support, and will assist us in finding a suitable venue for the panel discussions. They will also advertise our events through their extensive communication channels, helping us reach the general public and inviting them to participate in the final panel. This collaboration will significantly enhance the visibility and impact of our activities.
- **General public as juries:** During the final event of InterACT, representatives of the citizens' groups and civil society will act as juries on the policy briefs developed by the fellows. Additionally, these events will be open to public attendance. *KPI2.11: ≥ 50 members of the general public attending the final panel.*

Target groups: General public and non-specialist audiences. **Key messages:** Emphasis on the contributions of the fellows towards addressing societal challenges.

Exploitation measures

The InterACT programme targets a set of challenging and highly specific Exploitation Objectives (EOs), along with KPIs to measure their achievement:

EO1: To influence policies: Fellows will develop policy briefs based on the scientific output of each research project. The policy briefs will be well-informed, impactful, and directly address societal challenges. This goal will be achieved through: (i) **Dedicated training and mentorship:** Fellows will receive training and guidance on the entire cycle of development of a policy brief, from writing to presenting them in a convincing way; (ii) **Focus on societal changes:** Each policy brief will address a key societal challenge, ensuring that the research findings contribute to currently needed policy-making processes; (iii) **Panel presentation:** Each of the 14 policy briefs will be presented to stakeholders from the Quadruple Helix, including policy-makers. The panel will be an opportunity to share the findings and their implications, as well as to boost the fellows' credibility among policy-makers. *KPI3.1: ≥ 5 EU, national, or regional policy-makers attending final panel.*

EO2: To identify and protect social innovations: Early identification and protection of exploitable results will be ensured through patents and data protection. The development of an IP portfolio will be closely monitored by the VUB TechTransfer Office, through: (i) **Intellectual Property (IP) Portfolio:** Monitoring and managing the development of an IP portfolio, focusing on innovations with significant societal benefits; (ii) **TechTransfer Office Support:** The Technology Transfer Office will play a crucial role in identifying, protecting, and commercializing research outcomes through patents and data protection. *KPI3.2: Protection measures adopted for ≥ 3 societal innovations by Y5.*

EO3: To develop a robust Data Management Plan (DMP), which is crucial for managing the generated data optimally and maximizing their scientific and societal exploitation potential. The DMP will be developed within the first six months of the program to ensure it is ready for when the first set of fellows start collecting/generating data. Key components of the DMP will include: (i) **Guides and online resources**, such as the guidelines from VUB PURE institutional repository; (ii) **Data classification:** defining data types, standards, formats, and capture methods for interoperability; (iii) **Rules for data management** in the short-, medium-, and long-term storage, outlining sharing, access, and re-use rights. Each fellow will be responsible for implement the DMP into their individual projects. Having data that meet the F.A.I.R. principles will allow the scientific community to build on, validate, and replicate the results of the InterACT projects. *KPI3.3: ≥ 30 downloads of data per project by Y5.*

EO4: To exploit the InterACT research & training programme. During the project, the ISMC will organise meetings with Department Heads at VUB and within the EUTOPIA network to discuss how the fully operational InterACT programme can be integrated into the current curriculum offer for PhDs and postdocs and can be exploited post-project within VUB and partner institutions. This approach will ensure InterACT's sustainability and further impact. *KPI3.4: By Y5, ≥ 5 letters of commitment to replicate the contents and structure of InterACT.*

Target groups: Policymakers and academic institutions. **Key messages:** Translation of research into policy, fostering practical applications, protecting intellectual property, and ensuring sustainable adoption of the training program.