

Dear Action Chairs and Grant Holder Managers,

A year into the pandemic has highlighted the role of digital tools to ensure continuity of our lives and work activities. In responding to the unmet need of the running COST Actions and COST Innovators Grants, we have designed the COST Virtual Networking Tools (VNT) for the promotion of virtual networking.

**Today we are launching the Virtual Networking Tools**, aiming to build capacity and spread the uptake of virtual collaboration across different research communities. It will run as a pilot until the end of the Horizon 2020 i.e., 31 October 2021. Depending on its uptake and success metrics, these grants may continue under the Horizon Europe programme.

The Virtual Networking Tools include two new types of grants, which have the aim to further support the Actions to implement their activities as much as possible during these challenging times. It goes without saying that face-to-face meetings bring value and impact that cannot be entirely replaced by digital platforms. However, we trust these grants will provide you with the needed support.

The two new grants available for all individuals from participating COST countries and MC Observers from Near Neighbour Countries, are:

- 1) Virtual Networking Support (VNS) Grant**, which aim at promoting virtual collaboration to complement traditional ways of collaboration within the research and innovation communities. This grant intends to stimulate virtual collaboration among the members of a given Action by designating a Virtual Networking Support Manager. The successful applicant will be selected by the COST Action Management Committee (MC) to promote virtual collaboration, such as developing a virtual networking strategy for the Action, taking overall responsibility for Virtual Mobility Grants (see below) and supporting the MC in the discussions and planning of virtual events and collaboration activities.

**The Virtual Networking Support (VNS) Grant amount per grant period is set to a maximum of EUR 4.000.** The MC shall define the exact amount of the grant, which does not necessarily cover all expenses related to undertaking the virtual networking coordination role. The MC shall document and provide written rationale for their decision with regard to the exact amount of the grant.

The evaluation criteria defined by the Action's MC should be communicated to all potential applicants. The selection of successful grantee shall be based on contributions to the overall objectives of the Action and the implementation of the COST Excellence and Inclusiveness Policy.

2) **Virtual Mobility (VM) Grants** aim at strengthening the existing networks by allowing scientists to foster collaboration in a virtual setting, to exchange knowledge, learn new techniques, disseminate Action results, etc. The successful applicant(s) will be selected by the MC to perform activities that do not necessarily require in-person presence. These activities may include surveys, questionnaires or preparation of protocols, virtual mentoring of activities that can generate capacity, build new skills, etc.

The maximum amount per VM Grant is EUR 1.500, with a **maximum of 6 VM Grants per Action per Grant Period (up to 1,500 EUR per grant, max 9,000 EUR)**. This amount can be reduced by the MC determined by the activities included in the grant application (as is standing practice with STSM Grants and ITC Conference Grants). The MC shall document and provide written rationale for their decision on amount of the grant.

The evaluation criteria defined by the Action's MC should be communicated to all potential applicants. The selection of successful grantee shall be based on contributions to the overall objectives of the Action, the implementation of the COST Excellence and Inclusiveness Policy as well as the approved strategy on virtual networking for the Action.

The running COST Actions and COST Innovators Grants can allocate up to 13,000 EUR in total to fund Virtual Networking Tools per Grant Period (Please note: the end of your Action Grant Period). The Action MC will define and use its own criteria to allocate these funds to individuals.

**Please note that COST will not provide extra budget for these new grants, and the Actions are expected to reallocate their current budget.**

**For more information:**

- About the type of activities that can be covered with these new grants, application and reporting process can be found in the [Vademecum](#) (version Apr 2021) and in the [FAQ document](#).
- e-COST has also been adapted to cover these new grants. You can now find this option available in your Action overview. Please, find all the relevant information about e-COST in the [step-by step user guide](#)
- To help address any questions you may have on these grants, a webinar will be held on 7<sup>th</sup> May 11am-12:30pm (CET). Please join us here: <https://cost-eu.zoom.us/j/88438262904?pwd=OUtka0xOQXRSUHVVPY1hWM3NXNk43Zz09>  
Passcode: 801839

We recommend that this pilot scheme is promoted by the Actions as much as possible, to improve virtual collaboration and compensate for the low budget expenditure during the challenging times of the CoVID pandemic.

For further questions please contact your Science Officer and Administrative Officer, who would be happy to help.

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