COST Action CA24158

Disparities In Surgical Specialization and Education in Cancer Training (DISSECT)

Call for applications for short-term scientific missions (STSM)

for implementation from 1 November 2025 to 31 October 2026

Call 1

1. About DISSECT

Cancer surgery remains a key treatment for solid malignancies, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) where access to newer therapies is limited. With the growing global cancer burden, the demand for high-quality surgery will rise. As precision medicine advances, cancer surgeons need not only technical expertise but also an understanding of multidisciplinary cancer care, preventive and palliative care, clinical trials, and effective communication. However, disparities in surgical oncology training exist across Europe, affecting access to complex cases, clinical trials, mentorship, and research facilities. These variations are linked to economic disparities, leading to differences in patient outcomes.

The DISSECT project aims to identify and address these disparities in cancer surgery training in Europe. By fostering knowledge exchange between high- and low-resource settings, the project will enhance multidisciplinary training, mentorship, and research capacity. It aligns with Europe's Beating Cancer Plan to ensure equitable access to high standards of care and to reduce cancer-related inequalities. DISSECT seeks to create a sustainable impact on cancer surgery outcomes through improved training and innovation in surgical education.

The main objective of the DISSECT Action is to create a cohesive network and identify the critical gaps and variabilities in cancer surgery training in Europe. The consortium aims to leverage on knowledge exchange between high and low-resource settings, strengthen the multidisciplinary approach, integrate patient partnership and facilitate mentorship in cancer surgery training, and foster research and surgical innovation. This will be done through achievement of our objectives:

1. Perform a needs assessment to identify areas of cancer surgery training disparities through surveys and focused group discussions.
2. Organize at least two multi-stakeholder meetings within the funding period to develop a roadmap to address critical areas of disparities in cancer surgery training and assess its impact.
3. Identify five priority areas of disparities in cancer surgery training where collaboration from high and lower resource settings can have meaningful impact.
4. Generate at least five open access publications from the DISSECT network in peer-reviewed journals.
5. Facilitate knowledge exchange and a multidisciplinary team approach between high and low-resource settings
6. Conduct joint MDTs with virtual clinical discussions between paired high and low resource institutions within the network DISSECT
7. Assess the impact of these joint MDT sessions on patient outcomes, surgical decision-making

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among young surgeons and research output among trainees.
8. Develop learning pathways and tailored mentorship programs for surgical trainees dedicated to patient-focused cancer research, effective leadership, communication, and innovation
9. Develop and assess the feasibility of a tele-mentoring program for surgeons to improve competency in cancer surgery, decision-making for complex clinical cases, and predicting surgical outcomes

Five working groups (WG) focus on work as follows:
- WG1. Identification & evaluation of disparities
- WG2. Building research capacity
- WG3. Multidisciplinary teams (MDT) knowledge exchange
- WG4. Surgical mentorship
- WG5. Innovation

Detailed information on the planned activities in the Working Groups can be found in this document.

2. What is a short-term scientific mission (STSM)

A short-term scientific mission (STSM) is a visit to a host organization located in a different country by a researcher or innovator to conduct a specific piece of work for a determined period of time. A STSM grantee receives funding for this work within an international team and gains new knowledge or access to equipment or techniques not available in the home institution.

STSMs serve several key purposes in EU COST Actions. COST networks encourage international collaboration among researchers and innovators in various scientific fields. The STMSs are an integral part of every COST Action. They:

- Facilitate the international mobility of researchers, especially early-career scientists, to foster new collaborations and sharing knowledge across borders.
- Enhance research skills by transferring new techniques and using equipment in different environments.
- Build and strengthen networks that lead to long-term collaborations, joint publications, and other research activities.
- Boost research projects by providing essential skills, data, and collaborations that support the Action.
- Foster development of early career researchers, including through the establishment of a research profile and gaining international experience.
- By encouraging collaboration and knowledge sharing, STSMs contribute to the overall scientific excellence of the research community involved in COST Actions.
- Support COST policies on promoting gender balance, enabling young researchers, and broadening geographical inclusiveness. Grantees should be selected in an open and transparent way.
- Advance COST Excellence and Inclusiveness Policy and Principles of Openness.

3. Open call

Applications should support the DISSECT objectives and Working Groups as described in this document. This call is open-ended. There is no set deadline. Each application will be processed on a first-come first-served basis. It is especially aimed at STSMs that will be implemented from November 2025 to October 2026.

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4. Eligibility

STSM travel grants are available to applicants employed by, or affiliated to, an institution, organization, or legal entity in a **COST full/cooperating member country** or a legal entity in a **near neighbour country (NNC)**. Institutions or entities based in International Partner Countries (IPC) are not eligible.

The eligible countries are listed in COST Documents & Guidelines, particularly, in the Country and Organisations Table.

5. Financial support

STSM grants provide a contribution for travelling, accommodation and subsistence expenses, and for miscellaneous expenses (such as conference fees) arising from the implementation of the project and the delivery of the report to the COST Action Management Committee. There is no limit to the maximum duration up to October 2026. Up to a maximum of EUR 4,000* in total can be awarded per grant. Participants are reminded that cancellation insurance fees are an eligible expense and are advised to contract one. Grants are paid by the Grant Holder after the completion of the activity and after approval of all required report/documentation.

*The final amount of financial support is decided by the Action Chair/Grant Holder based on the advice of the Grant Awarding Coordinator. The request of the applicant should reflect the duration and location of the STSM. For this year's work and budget plan, the average for an STSM is set on €2,100.

6. The grant awarding process

Each STSM must be carried out entirely within one Grant Period. Each Grant Period runs from the 1 November until the 31 October of the following year.

The grant awarding process for STSMs starts with a call under a strict (annual) budget. Each application is reviewed by the Grant Awarding Committee members who are guided by the Grant Awarding Coordinator.

STSM applicants should not book anything (e.g., transportation or accommodation) before receiving a confirmation through a Grant Letter.

7. Application procedure

Applicants must have an e-COST profile and applications must be submitted online in e-COST via Apply for a Grant and selecting the 'STSM' option.

Applications comprise:

1. An online Grant Application which includes:
   - A project title for the mission that communicates the content and purpose of the work.
   - Start and end date of the STSM (within the active grant period up to 31 October 2026, i.e., no overlap across two consecutive grant periods).
   - Grant requested.
   - Basic information about the host institution and contact person.
2. A completed Application Form (Application template) describing goals, description of the work to be carried out by the applicant, expected results (outcomes) and description of the contribution to

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the Action MoU objectives.

3. Confirmation from the host institution of its availability to receive the applicant.
4. A justification document setting out:
   - The statement describing applicant's motivation (1-2 pages).
   - The financial plan (about 1 page) clearly indicating the expected costs (e.g., transport, accommodation, living costs) following COST rules and the amount of support already received from other sources.
5. Applicant's curriculum vitae.
6. In the case of students, a support letter from the home institution.

8. Evaluation of applications

Applications will be evaluated for their quality and for their relevance to the objectives of DISSECT and its Working Groups. To avoid time-wasting, each application will be first screened by the Grant Awarding Coordinator to check that it is complete and that it is relevant to the Action. Incomplete applications are rejected with the possibility to resubmit. Irrelevant applications are also rejected and cannot be resubmitted. Following passing of the screen, STSM applications are evaluated by three independent experts from the Grant awarding committee (which consists of the Core Group members of the action). The Grant Awarding Coordinator manages the process so that evaluators have no personal or financial interest in the application. An evaluation score is given considering the proposal clarity, relevance for the Action, feasibility, planning, and expected outputs. Scores are from 1 to 6. The final evaluation outcome is announced within one month of submission.

A score is given (from 1 to 6 as above) for proposal clarity, feasibility, planning and expected outputs. Each reviewer scores each proposal independently. The STSM Grant Awarding Coordinator collates the outcomes of the independent evaluations and communicates the final scoring (range 3-18 points). Proposals with high scores (≥ 15 points) will be financed, but only when all other evaluation criteria are acceptable, and the available budget suffices. The outcome will be communicated to the applicant by email. The results will be published in the COST Action website.

Summary of the evaluation criteria

Category	Notes	Scoring
Requisites		
Support letter - home Institute	Required for students only	Y/N
Support letter - host Institute		Y/N
Evaluation		
Motivation letter	Convincing	Y/N
Work plan		
Clarity and relevance	Score	1-6
Feasibility	Score	1-6
Planning	Score	1-6
Expected outputs	Score	1-6
Suitability of the candidate from the curriculum vitae and list of publications		
Grant request		
Travel	Acceptable	Y/N
Accommodation	Acceptable	Y/N
Subsistence	Acceptable	Y/N
Miscellaneous	Acceptable	Y/N

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Scores:

1 (very poor): proposal is not logical or not understandable. Not clearly linked to any working group.

2 (poor): proposal with limited understanding, planning and no clear objectives. Weakly linked to any working group.

3 (fair): proposal with some understanding, planning and objectives. Moderate links to at least one WG.

4 (good): good proposal but would benefit from refinement. Well-linked to at least one WG.

5 (very good): clear and effective plan that is well-linked to at least one working group.

6 (excellent): the proposed work plan is well-designed and planned, is feasible with good projected outputs. Strongly linked to at least one WG.

9. Submission of the STSM report and payment

- Once the activity has ended, the applicant claims the payment of the grant via e-COST. For this, the grantee submits the short STSM report using the STSM report template, and relevant documentation within 15 working days of the completion of the mission.
- The report includes a short description of the work, and main achievements of the STSM and planned future follow-up activities.
- Grants are paid by the Grant Holder after the completion of the activity and approval of all required report/documentation.

In addition to providing the STSM report, the applicant must upload a Scientific Report for use in communications that includes:

- The background and a full description of the work and the main scientific findings.
- The effect of the visit on personal development, networking, and capacity building (e.g., collaborations).
- Foreseen publications/articles resulting from the STSM (if applicable).
- The summary of the report will be published on the DISSECT website.
- In addition to the Mission Report, a document confirming the host institution of the execution of the STSM and Proof of evidence of the stay (a picture of the grantee working at the host institution facilities and a picture with the collaborators) that might be published in social media and website.

Documents that cannot be uploaded via the e-COST interface should directly be sent to Grant Awarding Coordinator, Sarah Cosyns (sarah.cosyns@ugent.be).

10. Frequently asked questions.

1. **Can I postpone my STSM?** If the originally intended period is not feasible, STSM could be postponed after consultation with the Grant Awarding Coordinator and Action Chair. Grantees should keep in mind that the approved STSM must be completed within the actual Grant Period, i.e. before 31 October 2025.
2. **I am uncertain about the exact dates for my trip. Can I apply for a flexible three-week period within a one-month timeframe, for example?** Yes, it is possible. However, STSMs require specific start and end dates, therefore, supporting documents have to state the period in which the applicant is considering doing the STSM.
3. **Where do I upload receipts for accommodation or meals after I have returned from the STSM?** You do not have to provide any receipts for accommodation or meals. The financial support is paid in the form of a grant. However, travel expenses and accommodation invoices must be presented in the case of cancellation by force majeure.

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Notes:
Each publication produced with support of a STSM must acknowledge the support of the COST Action and whenever possible use the COST and DISSECT logos (on slides and posters).

Acknowledgement text:
“This publication is based on work supported by the COST Action CA24158: Disparities In Surgical Specialization and Education in Cancer Training (DISSECT) .”

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