



## Synthesis Publication II

# Objectives and Effects of Qualification Measures in the REGULUS Research Network



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## WaHo\_boost – cross-cutting research project

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## Image Sources

Cross-cutting project team: WaHo\_boost

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Through the funding initiative “REGULUS – Regional Innovation Groups for Climate-Protective Forestry and Wood Industry,” the Federal Ministry of Research, Technology and Space addresses, as part of its Sustainability Research Strategy (FONA), the challenges facing German forests due to increasing storms, extreme droughts, rising temperatures, and pest infestations. Currently, ten cross-regional innovation groups are being funded, supported by a cross-cutting research project.

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# **Synthesis 2 – Objectives and impacts of the qualification measures in the REGULUS research network**

This synthesis examines the diverse qualification measures implemented by the cross-cutting project and embeds them within the broader context of the networking activities carried out. In doing so, it highlights the added value of these measures for the funding initiative.

As outlined in Synthesis I, forest and wood research in Germany is largely fragmented, with activities often conducted in geographically isolated settings. By identifying thematic overlaps and fostering a focus on shared key topics, the cross-cutting project promotes the strategic networking of the regional innovation groups (RIGs) and their diverse research activities (see Synthesis I).

A central approach of the cross-cutting activities is to conduct joint qualification measures. In addition to promoting professional and personal development, these activities are designed to strengthen collaboration among researchers, thereby helping to overcome the fragmentation of forest and wood research. In particular, the promotion of early-career researchers (ECRs) is explicitly anchored in the funding initiative and is recognized as essential for the sustainable advancement of the research field (BMBF 2021).

## **1. General objectives of the qualification measures**

The qualification strategy of the cross-cutting-project pursues two interrelated objectives: first, the direct support of individual competence and career development among ECRs, and second, the indirect establishment of a cooperative and well-connected research landscape.

The qualification measures offered by the cross-cutting project are intended to enable new interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary collaborations among actors in forest and wood research. These collaborations serve as the foundation for developing resilient research structures in the field. Enhancing cooperative capacities within the REGULUS network is intended to generate synergies in joint research activities.

To achieve this objective, professional expertise, personal skills, and communication abilities are essential for enabling continuous exchange and collaboration.

Accordingly, the qualification measures within the REGULUS network pursue three central objectives:

- Supporting early-career researchers embedded in the RIGs
- Enhancing scientific skills beyond disciplinary qualifications
- Reducing fragmentation in forest and wood research through networking

To meet these objectives, training courses, workshops, conferences, and summer schools are planned. Additionally, an integrative approach will ensure that researchers from diverse disciplinary backgrounds develop a shared understanding of the overarching questions addressed by REGULUS.

## **2. Terminology specification and implications for the qualification activities in REGULUS**

The target-group orientation of the qualification measures is central to the conceptual design of the program and addresses early-career researchers. In this context, the question arises as to which individuals within the REGULUS network can be assigned this group.

### **2.1 Definitions and contextualization**

The terminology used to describe researchers at the beginning of their careers varies widely. Terms such as young researchers, young scientists, scientific offspring, early-stage researchers, and emerging researchers are often used interchangeably. However, literature does not provide a consistent definition, and there is criticism of descriptive terms that imply a certain incompleteness in professional training (Krapp 2021). It is therefore recommended to avoid such terminology. The consortium behind the “Federal report on researchers in early career phases” proposes the acronym “WiKA”, which aligns with the international term “Early-Career Researchers” (Konsortium BuWiK (2025)).

A strict definitional demarcation of career phases does not appear constructive within REGULUS. Instead, an identity-building approach is pursued, grounded in shared values and a common scientific mindset. Both Milic et al. (2021) and Jirout (2020) emphasize key competences such as patience, methodical expertise, teamwork, willingness for interdisciplinary collaboration, and an awareness for lifelong learning. The promotion of personal and professional qualifications of ECRs and closely linked, high-quality research within REGULUS is based on these foundational competencies and values.

For reasons of linguistic connectivity and to promote an inclusive, modern understanding, this synthesis publication uses the term “ECR” as an abbreviation for researchers in their early career phases. Accordingly, this synthesis deliberately adopts this terminology instead of the previously used term “emerging researchers”.

### **2.2 Special characteristics of early-career researchers in the REGULUS network**

The REGULUS network is distinguished by its professional, methodological and thematic diversity. Researchers within the network employ a wide range of research approaches and pursue varied objectives. They also bring diverse experiences and expertise in practice-oriented activities, which can facilitate the validation and practical implementation of scientific findings over the long term. A particular strength of the REGULUS network is the strong interest among its members in different methods and concepts related to forest and wood research. This fosters reciprocal learning processes, both among individual researchers and among the respective innovation groups. The methodological and research-related practical variety, openness, flexibility as well as the interest in diverse approaches should be actively supported and further developed through targeted qualification measures. When designing these activities, careful attention is always paid to the specific characteristics and needs of the target group.

Furthermore, REGULUS-ECRs demonstrate an intrinsic motivation to engage with pressing national and global challenges. Issues such as sustainability or the preservation of forests are not merely academic subjects; rather, they embody a normative commitment shared by the researchers.

### **3. Measures for promoting and networking ECR**

Previous experience within REGULUS has demonstrated that the targeted promotion of professional expertise and the development of scientific and interdisciplinary competencies are key levers for interdisciplinary collaboration and knowledge transfer between innovation groups. Consequently, REGULUS places particular emphasis on networking activities, offering tailored support and qualification measures for ECRs. These can be categorized into direct and indirect formats: Direct formats are offered by WaHo\_boost and are specifically designed for ECRs, while indirect formats are offered within the respective innovation group or address the entire REGULUS community, while strategically supporting the networking and qualification of ECRs.

#### **3.1 Direct formats**

##### **Workshops**

To date, workshops have covered topics such as “Entrepreneurship and Team Building” (2023, Freising) and “Stakeholder Communication in Change Processes” (2024, Eberswalde). Upcoming events on “Conflict Management” and “Navigating Inter- and Transdisciplinarity” are currently in planning.

##### **Mentoring**

Using the online platform “Gather town”, mentors and ECRs have been matched, resulting in three active mentoring tandems so far. The mentoring program provides a valuable opportunity for ECRs to reflect on their research processes with more experienced colleagues and to discuss challenges. It also grants access to an extended network of researchers and institutions in forest and wood research beyond their own innovation group. In the long term, the program aims to foster intergenerational exchange and generate new impulses for REGULUS research.

##### **REGULUS Lunch**

The REGULUS Lunch is designed to provide an ongoing forum for scholarly exchange in an atmosphere of trust. Depending on the stage of individual projects, the focus is initially on presenting one’s research process and later on discussing findings. This format enables ECRs to present their research at various stages of development and receive feedback on aspects such as research design, methodological approaches, or the communication of findings from a knowledgeable and engaged audience. The contributions from ECRs are complemented by sessions addressing relevant interdisciplinary topics in scientific work, led by researchers from the REGULUS community or external experts.

##### **Forum**

The REGULUS Forum is an online exchange platform integrated into the REGULUS website, aimed at promoting inter- and transdisciplinary networking within the network. For ECRs, a dedicated “ECR Dialogue” area has been established, offering a protected space to discuss discipline-specific and interdisciplinary topics as well as everyday research challenges. Additionally, the forum provides cross-target group discussion rooms, such as those focused on the cross-cutting theme “Joint Data Spaces”, supporting the efficient use and development of research data, and the “Career Board”, facilitating exchange on professional perspectives.

##### **LinkedIn Spotlights**

The LinkedIn Spotlight feature on the social media platform LinkedIn gives ECRs the opportunity to showcase their research and key areas of activity. The aim is to increase scientific visibility and foster

interdisciplinary exchange. This format also enables researchers to make new contacts and expand their professional networks.

### **3.2 Indirect formats**

#### **Coordinators' Meetings**

REGULUS innovation groups are primarily coordinated by ECRs. This increases diversity at the leadership level and enhances the connection between ECRs and coordination teams.

#### **Conferences**

REGULUS status conferences and REGULUS sessions at scientific conferences are designed to facilitate exchange and networking among all participants. Keynote presentations and interactive formats highlight the relevance of individual research for the sustainable development of the forest and wood sectors. At the same time, these events address cross-cutting themes in ways that encourage active participation, especially by ECRs.

#### **PhD Student Meetings within Innovation Groups**

Most REGULUS innovation groups offer formats specifically designed to support early-career researchers in their work. These range from access to established graduate schools at participating universities to dedicated mentoring and coaching programs. Additionally, regular meetings among REGULUS researchers ensure ongoing exchange, discussion of project progress, and integration into their respective innovation groups.

### 3.3 Overview of the qualification and networking activities

The formats described above aim to strengthen the qualifications and competencies of ECRs. Table 1 provides an overview that, beyond the individual formats, outlines both subject-specific and transferable competencies.

Table 1: Overview of the qualification and networking activities for ECRs.

Format	Impact	Example/Details	Competencies Developed	Notes
<b>Workshop</b>	Promotes subject-specific, social, and personal competencies, as well as networking	“Entrepreneurship and Team Building” (2023), “Stakeholder Communication in Change Processes” (2024)	Communication, teamwork, empathy	Workshop on “Conflict Management” planned for 2025, others in preparation
<b>Mentoring</b>	Individual development and support through mentors	Three tandems formed via Gather.town	Reflective competence, networking, problem-solving	Ongoing; further development envisaged
<b>REGULUS Lunch</b>	Presentation of own research projects	Presentation of dissertation status and challenges	Presentation skills, self-reflection, feedback	Format expansion/adaptation required
<b>Forum</b>	Digital platform for inter- and transdisciplinary exchange	ECR dialogue, discussion rooms on cross-cutting themes, career board	(Digital) communication	Ongoing; continuous expansion planned
<b>LinkedIn Spotlights</b>	Increase in visibility and networking	Showcasing research/activity foci on LinkedIn	Communication	Ongoing; currently being implemented and adapted
<b>Coordinators’ Meetings</b>	Develops leadership competencies and exchange between innovation groups	Regular meetings for coordination and project development	Communication, leadership, organization	Ongoing
<b>Graduate schools</b>	Advanced training for doctoral researchers	Collaborations between RIGs and respective universities	Subject-specific exchange	Decentralized
<b>Conferences</b>	Presentation of own research and networking within the scientific community	1st and 2nd REGULUS Status Conferences in Hamburg (2023) and Freiburg (2024), external conferences	Networking, scientific communication	3rd REGULUS Status Conference planned for 2026

## 4. Conclusion and Reflection

The qualification measures within the REGULUS network aim to provide targeted support for early-career researchers (ECRs) by expanding their professional and interdisciplinary competencies and enhancing their visibility in the research community. These measures not only support the individual development of researchers but also foster long-term networks and interdisciplinary collaborations among ECRs.

In this context, the measures of the cross-cutting project make several important contributions. The visibility of ECRs is enhanced through their presence on social media, participation in conferences, scientific presentations at the REGULUS Lunch, and the public documentation of qualification activities. Personal research stories from the scientific community, as presented through the X Spotlight format, not only increase the visibility of individual researchers but also contribute to greater public visibility for forest and wood research more broadly. On social media, highly motivated and qualified researchers act as ambassadors for the REGULUS network, benefiting both their own career planning and the broader research community.

The qualification measures in REGULUS do not focus exclusively on disciplinary expertise but explicitly emphasize the development of soft skills as well. Activities such as the REGULUS Lunch, the mentoring program, and graduate schools primarily enhance professional knowledge and expertise. In contrast, REGULUS workshops pursue a different approach, concentrating on skills that go beyond discipline-related knowledge such as communication and innovative problem-solving, which are crucial for both career and personal development. Strengthening these competencies enables REGULUS ECRs to make meaningful contributions to future forest and wood research while enhancing their individual career prospects.

A central element of both the qualification measures and the overall cross-cutting work in REGULUS is the networking of researchers. As outlined in Synthesis I, a well-connected forest and wood research community can address multiple challenges simultaneously, create synergies, and support the career development of ECRs. Therefore, networking is a key objective in all REGULUS qualification activities. Workshops and conferences, for example, not only to facilitate individual qualification and professional exchange but also to provide spaces for social interaction. The mentoring program promotes active networking across generations of researchers, ensuring long-term knowledge transfer. The E-Dialogue combines professional and personal exchange, while the coordinators' meetings bring together researchers in leadership roles within the REGULUS network.

Several key insights can be derived from the experiences of the cross-cutting project with qualification measures described here.

First, qualification activities prove particularly effective in activating networking potential within the research network. Professional exchange and the collaborative development of new knowledge provide an ideal starting point for personal interactions and professional cooperation.

Second, experience has shown that in-person events, such as conferences or workshops, are particularly effective in promoting direct exchange between researchers. Online formats inevitably impose technical limitations on spontaneous and synchronous communication among large numbers of participants. In contrast, digital channels such as the REGULUS forum or LinkedIn Spotlights offer clear advantages, including long-term availability and significantly broader reach. Accordingly, networking and qualification measures and strategies should always be selected and combined in a targeted and context-appropriate manner.

In summary, the REGULUS formats described here strengthen scientific collaboration, build competencies, and support ECRs in their professional development. Through the diversity of qualification opportunities, a research environment is created that promotes both individual skill development and structural knowledge exchange within the REGULUS network. In this way, the qualification measures make a significant contribution to networking activities within REGULUS.

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