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Future orientations of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA)



March 2024

Background

This policy contribution provides a response to the European Commission's consultations on the future orientations of Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) building on the inputs of four ACA members involved in their implementation and other related schemes (e.g., EURAXESS): the Agency for Mobility and EU Programmes (AMEUP, Croatia), the Czech National Agency for International Education and Research (DZS), the Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange (NAWA), and the Slovak Academic Exchange Agency (SAIA, n.o.). This contribution is complemented by ACA's other related policy inputs (e.g., *Towards a revised European learning mobility framework: ACA vision and way forward, May 2023* and *Erasmus+ Consolidating efforts for an impactful future, December 2023*).

1. Overall assessment of MSCA in Horizon Europe

a) What should be continued, reinforced, stopped, or modified, what novelties could be introduced?

MSCA is one of the EU's flagship schemes that has **proven its added value**. Overall, the programme yields positive results on many different levels. On the one hand, participation in the MSCA programme strengthens individual researchers' skills, competencies and excellence through international mobility. On the other hand, it structurally affects participating organisations, including higher education institutions, by setting standards for high-quality education, initiating excellent doctoral and postdoctoral training programmes and international research projects, and spreading excellence in research. Furthermore, participation in MSCA projects, especially consortium projects, enables researchers to access state-of-the-art research infrastructure, knowledge, expertise and skills of project partners, leading to sustainable international and cross-sector partnerships.

Considering this in-depth and multifaceted impact, the **continuation of MSCA** within the next EU framework programme (FP) as a very well-established and widely recognised flagship programme is of **utmost importance** for the sector. Whereas all currently existing MSCA schemes should be, with some minor modifications, maintained in the next FP, the following **reinforcements** could further expand the impact of the action:

- Currently, many highly-scored projects are not selected for funding, especially those under the MSCA Postdoctoral Fellowships (MSCA PF) scheme. A higher budget would be necessary to match the high interest in these schemes under FP10.
- The participation of newcomers should be supported through specific mechanisms to make the programme as inclusive as possible and open to underrepresented countries, various types of entities and researchers. One of such instruments could be an extension of the current hop on scheme under the widening measures to cover MSCA projects as well.
- There should be a mechanism allowing for a more flexible and more timely adjustment of the unit contributions in line with the changing economic landscape within the EU. This is especially important for the unit contributions towards the remuneration of recruited researchers.
- EU should keep investing in both research and complementary skills development. Stronger impact might be achieved by **calibrating evaluation criteria on skill acquisition and quality of supervision**. The latter goals should be reinforced as important research objectives, especially at the stage of proposal evaluation. Expert evaluators should be as knowledgeable in human resources development (in research) and (research) project management as they are excellent researchers in a given research field.
- Thanks to its fully bottom-up manner, MSCA represents one of the most appreciated parts of the FP. Therefore, it is imperative that MSCA offers **opportunities in all scientific areas and disciplines**. The possibility to conduct MSCA PF stays on nuclear research topics thanks to synergies with the Euratom programme should be maintained in the next programme period.
- What might be assessed, however, is the **panel structure**, which has been kept since the onset of this programme. The division gives some specific disciplines (e.g., Mathematics and Economic Sciences) more visibility than others that are more broadly defined. The panel structure can, thus, be used as an instrument to support research in certain emerging or important areas that might otherwise be diluted within broader panels.

- It could be worthwhile reconsidering the **professional age limitation** for MSCA PF applicants, currently set at eight years of research experience after the PhD defence. Though a younger generation of professionals should be the primary target group to support future EU prosperity and innovation-based economy, the involvement of more senior scientists (acting as supervisors now) that seek international, inter-sectoral and interdisciplinary experience, including redirection of their careers towards the private sector, might further widen the programme impact.
- The **MSCA Staff Exchanges** (MSCA SE) is a scheme that could benefit from further simplification. Complex intersectorality and interdisciplinarity requirements make the consortium building a complex and lengthy process, affecting the overall interest in this action.
- It is highly important to further reinforce MSCA's pivotal role in promoting high standard **research culture** across Europe based on the principles of open science, responsible research, diversity, equity, and inclusion within the research community. Furthermore, more weight could be put on inclusiveness and promoting **academic freedom** across the European Research Area (ERA).

b) Should the five intervention areas be maintained in the future, should some be modified and/or should other ones be introduced?

The focus on the **main five MSCA intervention areas** should be **continued** in future, including promoting public outreach where European Researcher's Night is already a trademark of its own. Further modifications can be considered in the future:

- There is a growing need to focus the programme more strongly on how to **retain research talents within the EU** rather than attract it (as it is now and it is yielding results). While it is important to attract talents to the EU, it is even more important to retain them within the EU (and even more so, if trained on the MSCA grants).
- Given that a significant share of researchers work at universities and their responsibilities are wider than conducting research encompassing education of future generations, one of the priorities in the section "Fostering new Skills through Excellent Training of Researchers" should be to **foster teaching skills**. This skill area should have equal emphasis as research skills development among researchers whose role includes teaching in higher education.
- Fostering mentoring skills, raising awareness and encouraging supervisors to participate in MSCA projects is one of the foci of the programme. Excellent incoming researchers are potential supervisors who also help organisations attract new researchers by participating in MSCA PF and Doctoral Networks (MSCA DN). To further enrich supervision in MSCA projects, it would be necessary to allow MSCA postdoctoral fellows to pursue **complementary teaching and supervision activities in MSCA DN projects**. In this respect, having an experienced and excellent supervisor, who is also MSCA postdoctoral researcher, can only be beneficial for excellent research, dissemination of results and project implementation.
- To strengthen human capital and skills development across the ERA, it is important to further **empower research managers**. Thus, although in MSCA SE projects participation is open to all staff categories (including technical, administrative and management staff) connected to research and innovation activities of the proposed project, the involvement of research managers is still quite limited despite their active role in communication and dissemination, knowledge transfer, scientific & administrative risk management, and resource management.

2. Future ambition, vision and context for MSCA

a) As a trendsetter programme, which novelties stemming from policy developments should the MSCA be championing in the future?

- According to the Evaluation Study on Excellent Science^[1], 31% of the MSCA project results are taken into account for decision-making at EU level. In this context, it is necessary to further **strengthen researchers' communication and dissemination skills** to support evidence-based decision-making, along with complementary skills in ethics and research integrity, especially in view of AI developments and security of the EU. Continuation of non-academic placement should be maintained to encourage the participation of public bodies in MSCA projects.
- MSCA should keep exploring ways how to encourage a more **environmentally friendly project implementation** in line with the MSCA Green Charter while strengthening researchers' skills related to sustainable growth. While the inclusion of these considerations in the ex aequo criteria shall help raise awareness of these recommendations, it remains to be seen to what extent these guidelines will be taken into consideration and reflected in practice.
- In line with the Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment, MSCA could take inspiration from the European Research Council (ERC) to consider a **wider variety of outputs** apart from publications for the quality assessment of applicants where the use of quantitative indicators (e.g., the number of students previously tutored) can be reassessed.
- MSCA should keep supporting **inclusive access** to the schemes. The related allowances to support family obligations, long-term leave or special needs should be maintained in the next FP. Further stratification of the family allowance could be used to support families with multiple children during the fellowship. The inclusion of the family allowance in the calculation of the long-term leave allowance could be also assessed.

b) How could the MSCA strengthen their impact, including structuring impact on R&I institutions & systems and their contribution to emerging challenges?

MSCA projects have an in-depth structural effect on organisations. Such impact is primarily manifested in the improved quality of education and study programmes, doctoral and postdoctoral training and mobility, supervision and mentoring (by implementing MSCA Guidelines on Supervision), career development, human resource management, strengthening of working conditions, adoption of gender equality practices, promotion of inclusiveness in research, as well as green and environmental research management (by implementing MSCA Green Charter), in line with the European Charter for Researchers. Further impact can be achieved by acting on the following matters:

- Given the bottom-up nature of MSCA, its contribution to tackling emerging challenges can be enhanced by **promoting specific disciplines**, for instances, by means of establishing a dedicated separate panel.
- The **follow-up financial support** provided after the end of the project period to ensure the continuation of collaboration (especially in case of MSCA COFUND programmes) could facilitate structuring the impact of these projects.
- For MSCA DNs, it might be useful to support **early-career researchers' orientation towards the labour market across sectors** (in and outside of academia) in the partner countries on top of the project secondments (e.g., through a mentoring scheme, career fairs). Such activities are pursued under [EURAXESS REBECA Hub](#), and further synergies can be supported, for example through the [EURAXESS Talent management hub \(EURAXESS Researcher careers in academia hub\)](#).

^[1] Evaluation study on Excellent Science in the European Framework Programmes for Research and Innovation – Horizon 2020. URL: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/bbdf6e66-149d-11ee-806b-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>.

- MSCA can be instrumental for advocating for exceptions with regard to lowering social security administrative burden for involved institutions related to EU mobility and secondments of researchers. The EURAXESS talent circulation hub aims to bring this issue to the EU policy dialogue.
- To support further ERA integration and MSCA promotion, it could be worthwhile introducing an **MSCA ‘sabbatical’** for alumni, or alternatively an MSCA award. The purpose would be for such a grantee to visit several workplaces in different regions of ERA in his/her specific scientific field to build bridges, connect and promote the research and the actors behind via joint scientific papers or publicly visible activities.

3. Synergies with other Union programmes + relations with national R&I funding and policies

a) *What are best opportunities for complementarities of the MSCA within the Framework Programme or synergies with other European funding programmes, especially Erasmus+?*

Complementarities and synergies of MSCA with other programmes are important to reach significant impact and efficiency of MSCA projects, to emphasise the EU added value, sustainability of the cooperation and networks, multiple use of MSCA results, strengthening of organisational and research capacity, strategic approach to internationalisation and visibility of organisations as well as combination and complementarity of funding.

Synergies between MSCA and the Erasmus+ programme are quite far-reaching^[1] and should be further enhanced in the future. Thus, **Erasmus+ Partnerships for Cooperation (KA2)** (including Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters) can be seen as a starting (or complementary) point for future MSCA consortium projects encompassing SE and DNs. Joint activities such as participation of MSCA fellows to trainings, and summer schools are also possible. Similar cooperation is visible within the Capacity Building in higher education where already developed networks of new education programmes and innovative capacities can further expand their cooperation via MSCA. MSCA SE consortia can create Alliances for innovation resulting in new doctoral and postdoctoral programmes.

- Further synergies can be explored with the **European Universities Initiative and Key Action 1 staff mobility for teaching and training**. As a complementary agile bottom mobility scheme for academic and administrative staff at higher education institutions, KA1 staff mobility could be more actively used to develop research skills or prepare research projects funded through MSCA or other parts of Horizon Europe, especially to empower early career researchers and academics to engage in more competitive excellence-driven research and innovation.
- Complementarities with **COST actions** are visible by spreading best practices in excellent and interdisciplinary research as well as for career development of young researchers. The **European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF)** is also a proven complementary scheme, enabling researchers not financed by Horizon Europe to implement their scientific projects.
- Further complementarities are needed with EU activities on **Gender Equality Plan**, research performance assessment and issues tackled under the Council Recommendation on a European framework to attract and retain research, innovation and entrepreneurial talents in Europe.

b) *Can the Seal of Excellence be used in a more effective/comprehensive way to create synergies? What other approaches are possible to facilitate alternative funding for excellent projects that cannot be funded through the MSCA due to lack of budget? How can European Structural and Investment Funds be better used to support the MSCA?*

- Operationally, it could be efficient if similarly to ERA Fellowships/ widERA COFUNDs, member states could ring-fence some **ESIF funding** for MSCA PF or MSCA COFUND schemes (e.g., at the Work Programme development stage) to support faster and simpler decisions for Seal of Excellence (SoE) projects to avoid reapplying at national level.

^[1] For more details, see e.g. <https://marie-skłodowska-curie-actions.ec.europa.eu/document/synergies-between-the-marie-skłodowska-curie-actions-and-erasmus-in-the-area-of-higher-education>

- Furthermore, the SoE could have a **lower threshold** (70%) in some programmes (e.g., MSCA COFUND) to allow more projects to be financed from alternative sources. It would be worth considering removing the financing of MSCA projects from state aid as is the case with Horizon Europe.
- To raise awareness of complementarities, it would be beneficial to have **comprehensive guidelines and best practice examples**, which could focus on synergies with Horizon Europe and ESIF in MSCA COFUND projects.

4. Innovation

a) What actions have worked best under the MSCA in Horizon Europe to support innovation? What could be improved?

The MSCA programme encourages industry representatives to participate in collaborative projects. One of the main drivers for industry (and innovators) participation is to establish long-lasting collaboration and partnership with the academic sector and transfer knowledge across sectors and disciplines. It is important to **continue promoting the innovative aspects** of MSCA and to engage industry representatives in collaborative projects.

- It could be worthwhile making MSCA projects (Training and Mobility type of action, TMA) **eligible for the Pathways to Synergy** (especially to downstream synergies) under the Widening participation and strengthening the ERA Work Programme. The expected outputs of the downstream synergies pathway include valorisation of results, knowledge transfer and technology uptake, exploitation and diffusion of R&I results into the market as well as improved intellectual asset management and technology uptake. Participation in the downstream synergies is open to consortia under the Research and Innovation Actions (RIA) but not to MSCA projects classified as TMA actions.
- A more extensive collaboration with EEN should be considered when promoting MSCA schemes. The on-site partner search can also be specifically organised for MSCA projects.
- **Cross-sector research** between academic and non-academic sectors contributes significantly to the development of both bottom-up and top-down innovations. However, the MSCA programme does not support the participation of experienced researchers who are not PhD holders, which in itself does not reward the notion of cross-sectoral careers and unconventional career paths, and as such – works against potential innovation.
- The recently established [EURAXESS Startup Hub](#) supporting researchers who wish to start the entrepreneurship career could serve as an inspiration for MSCA or get further promoted in the MSCA context.

b) How can we further encourage collaborations that are conducive to innovation and how to further promote entrepreneurial competences and skills among fellows?

- There is a growing need to **showcase success stories**, for instance, by presenting former MSCA fellows' entire career path, exemplifying those who moved across sectors, featuring entrepreneurial competencies and skills, and promoting diverse research career paths. NCPs can play an active role in such communication. Raising awareness of the benefits of mutual cooperation on specific (especially business-oriented) fora should be considered to help overcome the biases that exist.
- Entrepreneurial competencies and transferable skills can be **promoted as part of study programmes**. Furthermore, the European Competence Framework for Researchers and EURAXESS Career Development e-tool can be more actively used as part of doctoral and postdoctoral curricula both under MSCA and Erasmus+ programmes. It could also be worthwhile promoting MSCA fellows' participation as supervisors and teachers to share their experience in innovative training programmes.

5. EU priorities and Global Approach, including the need to preserve the EU strategic autonomy

a) Is there a need to attract through the MSCA more high-level foreign talents/expertise in domains where there are competence gaps in Europe, especially from high-income countries? If yes, how to achieve this?

The MSCA programme is a bottom-up programme, open to all domains of research and innovation, stimulating applicants to initiate state-of-the-art projects with scientific, economic and societal impact. Project proposals have to address challenges and priorities at the European or global level in the impact description part.

MSCA has been already quite successful with attracting talent. As stressed above, another highly important objective is to retain talent within the EU, especially if trained on MSCA. Several modifications could be implemented to achieve this goal:

- For MSCA PFs, it could be worthwhile considering **continued collaboration with the host institution after the end of the grant** given that a two-year project duration can be insufficient for undertaking transnational mobility, developing meaningful integration at the host institution and producing valuable research results (including scientific publications). MSCA-PFs (European PFs) could be granted for **up to 36 months** (+ 6 month non-academic placement) and a similar extension could be considered for MSCA Global PFs.
- Shorter-term opportunities could be kept as a possibility under MSCA COFUND to shift the effort of programme management for shorter-term opportunities to interested institutions at the national level (MSCA COFUND beneficiaries).
- Alternatively, an extended MSCA COFUND type of action to **attract more senior type of talent** might be considered to involve R3 level researchers in the scope of MSCA, as argued above. Consequently, the impact on regional/national ecosystem and the whole of ERA could be multiplied. The multi-beneficiary/regional/country-scope projects rather than mono-institutional would be more appreciated in this respect.
- To achieve this, providing accessible follow-up funding to sustain the collaboration between the fellow and the hosting institution could be beneficial. This could involve creating a scheme similar to non-academic placement, in the form of seed funding for collaboration, which would apply regardless of where the fellow goes. Such an approach would help foster and further develop collaborative links, possibly sustaining them for a period that would have a long-lasting structuring effect on widening countries.

b) What measures applicable to MSCA could be reinforced to protect EU interests and assets, and which new ones could be introduced?

Overall, MSCA schemes are based on openness and international cooperation, which should be preserved and encouraged. MSCA projects are subject to Horizon Europe-specific measures regarding restricted participation or the protection of EU interests that are stated in the General Annexes of the Work Programme. Further supporting measures could be as follows:

- **Raising awareness of the IPR** and offering more IPR trainings for the MSCA-specific conditions by the European IP Helpdesk can be further encouraged.
- In MSCA-PF-GF, the rules already require so that the applicant is either a national or a long-term resident in the EU or country associated to Horizon Europe (i.e. minimum five years of continuous residency). This requirement could potentially be reassessed so that applicants must have the official status of long-term residents. As for **non-academic secondments**, it can be considered whether these should be allowed to institutions in countries that do not respect IPR or can otherwise misuse the EU knowledge.
- Further interests could be identified by looking at cooperation with European researchers diaspora networks spread globally, Marie Curie Alumni Association (MCAA) chapters, and EURAXESS Worldwide.

c) How could the cooperation with low and middle-income countries be reinforced? How to ensure brain circulation instead of brain drain from these countries?

To support more balanced exchanges, the EU could assist interested countries with developing reforms to support adequate working conditions via **Policy Support Facility activities and development aid instruments**. It could also be beneficial to support the strengthening of cooperation and creating incentives to design subsequent joint projects.

- For example, schemes inspired by Talent partnerships might be considered based on the collaborative model promoted by MSCA SE.
- Furthermore, projects proposing measures for effective reintegration of staff seconded from low and middle-income countries back at their home countries can be prioritised under MSCA SE.
- A scheme similar to ERA Fellowships but for low and middle-income third countries would be of value for MSCA-GF-PFs.

d) Should a dedicated fellowship scheme be created to support researchers at risk? should such a scheme, if desired, be situated (in MSCA, in other parts of the Framework Programme, outside the Framework Programme) and why?

Due to deteriorating security situation in the EU neighbourhood in the recent past, the EU should consider setting up a **recurrent scheme for researchers at risk** who cannot freely conduct research in their home country. The reason is not purely philanthropic but also pragmatic – it would be a huge loss for science to deprive these talents of the possibility to continue working on their research aims.

- The above scheme could be placed as a separate sub-type in the **annual MSCA PF calls**, so that regularity is ensured. Alternatively, it could be designed as a **separate call with several cut-off dates** throughout the year so that the scheme can even more flexibly react to the needs of such displaced researchers.
- A dedicated scheme for Ukrainian researchers – MSCA4Ukraine has a significant impact and sufficient funds should be secured to ensure its **continuation**. The cascading EU funding allocated through an experienced consortium supporting researchers at risk is proven as a good practice, supporting faster application, evaluation and project implementation.
- The Widening participation and strengthening the ERA could be used for the related purpose with all EU member states and associated countries eligible as hosts. A **more advanced life and career integration** from the host institution/country compared to standard MSCA PF/ERA Fellowships schemes might be desirable, as proven by the experience of the EURAXESS Science 4 Refugees hub.

6. Widening

a) The MSCA are excellence-based and cannot favour any geographical location. However, instruments like the ERA Fellowships show that the MSCA selection process can be leveraged to provide incentives to increase the participation from widening countries. What other incentives could be designed to increase widening participation and success rates?

The ERA Fellowships is a highly-appreciated and well-operated funding scheme providing efficient way of granting additional financial resources to encourage quality applications for PF within widening countries. In addition to ensuring mobility, it also strengthens the excellence, internationalisation, and visibility of organisations in such countries. It is of utmost importance to **continue the implementation of the ERA Fellowship** in the future.

- Apart from continuation of the ERA Fellowships scheme, which is highly valued by widening countries as it contributes to a brain gain to the region, other incentives, such as an **extension of the hop on scheme to MSCA DN and MSCA SE projects** could be considered.
- Proposals for MSCA DN and MSCA SE having beneficiaries from Widening countries AND proposing **measures for transfer of knowledge** and best practice in the areas such as: research management, management of human resources in research, research career development, assessment of research performance as well as those from non-widening countries to the widening ones could be awarded more advantageous evaluation.

- It is imperative that non-widening countries that are traditionally used to collaborating together are **incentivised to include widening countries** institutions to their projects.
- MSCA COFUND scheme could be more inclusive in terms of widening countries participation as it seems that their capacities to host excellent researchers is assessed lower than for EU15 countries. The structural impact of implementing COFUND in Widening organisations is greater than the impact of implementation in already established, excellent organisations in the EU 15 countries. It might be useful to consider the possibility of creating a **new Widening instrument for COFUND programmes**, similar to the ERA Fellowship, where COFUND applicants from widening countries that are on the reserve list would be co-financed based on the results of MSCA evaluation.
- **MSCA and Citizens action** as the major research communication and promotion activity is not that much associated with talent circulation, which is the crucial element in MSCA. Hence in the future it might be relevant to include such action rather under Widening participation and strengthening the ERA, where all EU member states and associated countries would be eligible to participate. Support across all eligible countries shall be envisaged to achieve truly pan-European character.
- The MSCA Work Programme 2024-2025, does not foresee ex-aequo criteria for MSCA and Citizens projects, as it does for the main MSCA activities (PF, DN, SE and COFUND). To facilitate geographical diversity and allocation of successful projects, it would be beneficial for the EC to consider **introducing ex-aequo criteria for the MSCA and Citizens**, whereby geographical distribution would be the priority after equal evaluation points in the evaluation criteria Excellence and Impact.

About ACA

Working under the motto “the European voice of national organisations for the internationalisation of higher education”, the Academic Cooperation Association (ACA) is a leading European association supporting research, innovative practice-development and smart policymaking in international higher education. Founded in 1993 as a member-driven platform, ACA provides a shared voice to national agencies for the internationalisation of higher education in Brussels and represents them in Europe and globally. Within ACA, the member organisations enhance their capacities and join forces in supporting and ‘doing’ internationalisation. ACA also has a long track record in conducting sound research and providing expert advice on key developments in international higher education to universities, governments and supra-national organisations alike. ACA’s core membership and identity is distinctly European, ‘with an eye’ on global trends. The association is supported by a Brussels-based Secretariat that plays a coordinator and expert role for the members.

