

ACA policy input on proposed changes to the (future) MSCA action

Introduction

Following the stakeholder meeting on the future architecture of the MSCA action organised by the European Commission on 15 April 2026, the Academic Cooperation Association prepared an input on several questions addressed during the stakeholder consultation.

This input is based on the views of several ACA members, including the Agency for Mobility and EU Programmes (AMEUP), the Czech National Agency for International Education and Research (DZS), the Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange (NAWA), and the Slovak Academic Information Agency (SAIA, n.o.). The input addresses the topics of Doctoral Networks (DN), Postdoctoral Networks (PN), Postdoctoral Fellowships (PF), Choose Europe Individual fellowships, and Staff Exchanges.

1. Doctoral Networks (DN)

1.1. *What are your views on this proposed architecture for the MSCA DN, especially with regards to flexibility and simplification?*

Overall, the proposed changes are seen as a **positive step towards greater flexibility, simplification, and better alignment with the diversity of doctoral education systems.**

- The proposed **removal of separate tracks for Joint and Industrial Doctorates**, could **possibly reduce administrative burden** and make the instrument more accessible, especially for institutions and countries with less experience in MSCA participation. However, this merge could also water down the visibility of the JD format. JDs offer strong potential for synergies with initiatives such as **Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters** and **European University alliances**, bridging education and research networks, which could be more clearly leveraged and made visible within the scheme.
- The proposed **extension of fellowship duration to four years within five-year projects is strongly supported**, as it would better align MSCA DNs with the duration of doctoral studies in many European countries, giving candidates sufficient time to complete their research, training, secondments and thesis.
- Secondments should be clearly planned at proposal stage to allow assessment of their expected contribution to candidates' training, and career progression, while **retaining flexibility to refine duration and content after recruitment** and, where relevant, at mid-term stage.
- The international, intersectoral and interdisciplinary dimensions must remain clearly embedded in the programme. In particular, **meaningful exposure to industry and other non-academic sectors** should remain a visible and assessable feature of the scheme.

- However, further clarification is needed regarding the proposed changes to management and indirect costs.
- Higher **coordination and management burden** borne by project **coordinators** should also be adequately reflected in the funding model in the future.

1.2. Specifically on Industrial and Joint Doctorates, would the new proposed structure (i.e. not mandating that all fellows within a consortium must pursue the same doctoral type) encourage consortia to engage more in those doctoral types? Could a financial incentive for each Industrial or Joint doctoral fellowship be an effective way for consortia to engage more in those doctoral types?

The **current requirement** that all fellows within a consortium follow the same doctoral model is seen as a **barrier**, especially for institutions that may be interested in participating in a Joint Doctorate but are not in a position to apply such a format across the entire network.

- **Allowing different doctoral formats within a single DN** would reduce the need for all participating institutions to align fully around one single model and allow consortia to design doctoral training pathways according to their research objectives, institutional capacities and partner expertise.
- However, **flexibility alone may not be sufficient to significantly increase participation**, as Joint and Industrial Doctorates involve additional complexity in areas such as joint supervision, legal framework preparation, degree arrangements, intersectoral coordination and mobility.
- **Financial incentives** could be an effective way to stimulate greater engagement. Such incentives would recognise the additional effort and costs involved in implementing these formats and would help compensate consortia for the higher management, coordination and administrative burden.
- **Possible financial incentives** could include: increased research, training and networking contributions; higher management and indirect cost contributions; additional support for supervisors involved in joint or intersectoral supervision; support for capacity-building activities within consortia and the whole cohort.
- At the same time, financial incentives should be designed in a way to **promote meaningful collaboration and high-quality doctoral training**, rather than simply encouraging consortia to label fellowships as Industrial or Joint Doctorates for financial reasons. Clear expectations should therefore be maintained regarding the quality of non-academic-sector exposure, joint supervision, institutional commitment and degree arrangements.
- Joint and Industrial Doctorate sub-schemes still might need **additional project time** (longer project duration) for the **administrative set-up** of the framework conditions for the joint/multiple/double supervision when compared to the standard modality (not limiting the consortia/partners in ID/JD to the pre-established operational structures).

2. Postdoctoral Networks (PN)

2.1 What are your views on this proposed new action? What measures should be implemented or avoided to ensure it meets the needs of its target audience, namely early-career postdoctoral researchers?

The proposed **Postdoctoral Networks** action is seen as a **potentially valuable addition to the MSCA portfolio**, particularly if it is designed to support the transition between doctoral training and more independent research careers.

- The proposed approach could provide early-career researchers with a structured environment, high-quality mentoring, interdisciplinary collaboration and exposure to intersectoral settings.
- At the same time, the added value of the action will depend on whether it is **clearly distinguished from both Doctoral Networks and Postdoctoral Fellowships**. It is not yet sufficiently clear how the training needs of early-career postdoctoral researchers would differ from those of doctoral candidates, nor how fellows would be integrated into the research groups of supervisors while still developing their own independent profile.
- If the action is introduced, it should **avoid reproducing the administrative barriers** associated with complex consortium-based schemes, as these could concentrate opportunities in already well-established institutions with strong international networks and undermine inclusiveness.
- Further **clarification** is needed on the notion of projects being organised around a “**shared challenge**”, by specifying whether such challenges would be defined by applicants, or whether they would be linked to pre-defined policy frameworks.
- **A fellowship period of at least 12 months** would be important to allow early-career postdoctoral researchers to ensure meaningful impact and avoid precarity.

2.2 In your opinion, what would be a suitable configuration for a postdoctoral network (PN), including number of institutions, fellows, duration and intersectoral distribution?

A suitable configuration for PNs would be **small to medium-sized consortia**. Keeping the consortia scientifically coherent and manageable would allow for stronger collaboration, smoother management, more personalised support for fellows and a stronger cohort dimension. At the same time, the scheme should remain sufficiently flexible to accommodate different disciplinary needs, career stages and institutional capacities. In light of this:

- A suitable network could include a **minimum of three to four core institutions**, complemented by associated partners where relevant. Financing a larger number of smaller-scale projects could also help broaden participation and reduce oversubscription.
- The **number of fellows should be around 6–15**, with flexibility up to 20 fellows in larger networks.
- Fellowship duration should be long enough to support meaningful research and career development, while remaining compatible with national employment frameworks. A fellowship **duration of 24–36 months** appears suitable, and up to 48 months at project level where this is needed for network implementation.
- **Intersectoral exposure** should be encouraged, but not made compulsory in all cases, depending on whether the network has a strong industrial or intersectoral profile. A reasonable intersectoral

component could be around **20–30% of the fellowship**, with the possibility of more extensive non-academic engagement in a dedicated industrial postdoctoral network model.

- **International/global mobility** (to potential associated partners outside the EU/EEA, HE AC) might be eligible up to around e.g. 1/3 of the total duration of the fellowship (to gather experience to solve the shared challenge more efficiently):
- The network should include a **structured mentoring system** – involving more than one mentor where feasible – as well as individual career and research development plans.
- **Joint training activities**, seminars, short group visits and summer schools should also be supported, as they could strengthen peer exchange, collaboration between supervisors and mentors, and the overall cohesion of the network. It may be useful to make such activities explicitly eligible under existing unit contributions or through a dedicated budget line.
- Further clarification would be useful on eligibility, including whether an **experience ceiling** beyond the post-PhD eligibility period would apply.

2.3 *Are there any innovative training models that could work well for a network of early postdoctoral researchers, keeping in mind the international, interdisciplinary and intersectoral dimensions?*

The European Competence Framework for Researchers could provide a useful reference point for designing such training. The training offer should go beyond scientific development and support early postdoctoral researchers in building the skills needed for independent research careers, leadership roles and cross-sector employment.

- **Transferable skills** training should be strongly embedded in the networks. Relevant areas include leadership and management skills, supervision and mentoring competencies, teaching skills, intellectual property rights, Open Science, research assessment reform, grant writing, research integrity and project coordination.
- **Challenge-based and cohort-based formats** could allow fellows to work in interdisciplinary teams around shared research challenges, while retaining responsibility for their own research.
- **Dual or cross-sector mentoring**, involving both academic and non-academic mentors, could provide fellows with balanced scientific, professional and career guidance. In addition, postdoctoral researchers could be given mentoring or co-supervision roles towards doctoral candidates where appropriate, including within related Doctoral Networks.
- **Training-through-research** should be encouraged, including joint supervision, interdisciplinary collaboration, project coordination, grant writing, research management and exposure to the valorisation, exploitation and dissemination of research results.
- **Rotational training models** – such as short-term placements, rotational training weeks and joint training schools across different institutions and sectors – could help embed the international and intersectoral dimensions of the action.
- Finally, the **training model should remain flexible** enough to accommodate different disciplinary cultures. While common European reference frameworks can help ensure quality and coherence, the content and intensity of training should be adapted to the needs of fellows and the specific configuration of each network.

3. Choose Europe Individual Fellowships

3.1 What are your views on the possible introduction of grant portability in MSCA Individual Fellowships?

The possible introduction of grant portability in MSCA Individual Fellowships is viewed with both **interest and caution**:

- On the one hand, **portability could strengthen researcher autonomy**, increase flexibility and make MSCA more attractive to international talent, in line with the broader objective of enhancing Europe's appeal as a research destination.
- At the same time, **portability could reinforce imbalanced brain circulation** by making it easier for fellows to move from less-resourced host environments to stronger research systems during implementation, thereby weakening the expected structural impact on the original host institution.
- For this reason, during Phase 1 portability **should not be introduced as an unrestricted right** to transfer the fellowship, but rather **limited to justified cases**, such as serious shortcomings or misconduct by the original host institution.
- Once the initial commitment to the host institution has been meaningfully implemented, additional incentives could also be considered where portability supports more balanced circulation, for example when a transfer or reintegration phase is planned towards a Widening or Transition country. Such incentives could include additional research, networking or reintegration support, helping to strengthen institutional capacity, knowledge transfer and long-term career opportunities in these regions.

3.2 What are your views on the two-phase model proposed for individual fellowships in FP10? What advantages would you identify with such a model? Should the scheme prioritise three-year fully funded fellowships as the core model, or does the second phase provide meaningful additional benefits?

The proposed two-phase model for MSCA Individual Fellowships is broadly seen as a promising approach to strengthening researchers' career development, provided that its implementation remains clear, fair and compatible with the bottom-up character of MSCA. Overall, **three-year fully funded fellowships should be prioritised as the core model**, while the second phase could provide meaningful additional benefits if designed to promote balanced career development and institutional engagement across the ERA.

- A **three-year fellowship** could give researchers sufficient time to undertake more ambitious projects and support stronger research outcomes, develop independence and build meaningful links with the host institution.
- However, it may create practical barriers for some researchers, especially those already employed in Europe, where long absences may conflict with sabbatical rules, teaching obligations or national employment frameworks.
- The **second phase could provide added value if it supports career transition** and retention of research talent, helping host institutions move towards more sustained integration of researchers.

- However, the **second phase should remain optional** and should not influence the evaluation of the initial fellowship proposal, otherwise it could disadvantage applicants and institutions that cannot credibly commit to a continuation phase from the outset.
- Enabling measures, including synergies with the Widening programme or mechanisms similar to ERA Fellowships, should be explored to support continuity and retention in Widening or less research-intensive countries. In their absence, institutions in these countries may struggle to offer competitive conditions for Phase 2, inducing fellows to choose hosts in stronger systems.
- The **financial and legal arrangements for Phase 2 should be clarified**. Questions remain regarding whether the second phase would be requested at application stage or later, whether it would require an additional evaluation, how the lump-sum model would function, and how it would interact with Country Correction Coefficients, ERA Fellowships and the Seal of Excellence.
- The model should preserve **opportunities for intersectoral mobility**. A fully funded non-academic placement of up to six months should remain possible, after Phase 1 or as part of Phase 2.
- Phase 2 should also be **recognised as part of institutional human resources and career development strategies**, including where relevant through links to HR Excellence in Research Award. This would encourage institutions to treat the second phase not only as a project extension, but as a strategic tool for talent retention, career progression and longer-term research capacity building.

3.3 What should be the incentives for organisations to participate in the second phase if it is voluntary?

If participation in Phase 2 is voluntary, **incentives** should make it feasible for host organisations to support longer-term researcher integration without creating excessive administrative or financial burden. The main incentive should be meaningful financial support, combined with flexibility in implementation and clear links to institutional career development strategies.

- **Additional EU funding** should be provided for research, training and networking costs during Phase 2, reflecting the additional effort required to support the fellow's longer term career prospects. A dedicated MSCA booster grant could be considered for this purpose.
- **Enhanced management and indirect cost contributions** would also be important, particularly to support research management capacity and ensure effective administration of the second phase.
- **Targeted top-up funding for Widening countries** should be considered to improve their ability to offer competitive conditions and retain talented researchers beyond Phase 1. This could be supported through synergies with the Widening programme or similar mechanisms.
- **Enabling synergies with other European, national, and regional funding instruments** could facilitate the long-term employment of fellows, reduce financial barriers for host organisations.

4. Articulation PN/IF

4.1. *What are your views on the proposed articulation between Postdoctoral Networks (PN) and Individual Fellowships (IF) in terms of supporting a clear progression logic across postdoctoral career stages, while respecting researchers' autonomy and accommodating disciplinary diversity?*

- The **distinction between the two instruments should be clear**. PN shall be oriented towards collaborative research around shared challenges, providing researchers with cohort-based training and international or intersectoral exposure. IF should shall provide greater opportunities for independent research, with a focus on research-driven projects and mobility.
- It should be **clarified whether PN and IF are intended as a continuous pipeline** or as two independent instruments that may be combined under certain conditions. It is not explicitly specified whether the model is intended to allow for an immediate transition between the two instruments, or whether a transition period between participation in PN and application for IF is required.
- PNs should not be perceived as a continuation of doctoral training, but as a **transitional space** in which early postdoctoral researchers develop autonomy, leadership skills and the capacity to design and lead their own research agendas.
- **Access to IFs should be independent** from prior participation in a Postdoctoral Network. Career paths are not always linear, and some researchers may be ready to propose and implement an independent project immediately after the PhD, while others may benefit first from a more structured network environment.
- Any eligibility threshold limiting access to Individual Fellowships, for example to researchers more than two years after the PhD, should be carefully justified. A strict benchmark could unnecessarily exclude strong candidates who already have a clear independent research profile early in their postdoctoral career.

4.2 *To what extent do the proposed differentiation mechanisms (e.g. structural design, eligibility or recruitment criteria) help clarify the respective target groups of PN and IF, guide applicants towards the most suitable scheme for them, and contribute to managing oversubscription? What adjustments, if any, would you recommend to strengthen the complementarity between the two actions and avoid unintended competition or exclusion effects?*

- **Eligibility criteria should be differentiated** but not overly restrictive. The distinction should focus primarily on the level of researcher independence and the degree of structured support, while maintaining enough flexibility to avoid excluding researchers with non-standard career paths or different disciplinary timelines.
- Evaluation criteria should further reinforce **complementarity**. PN could place stronger emphasis on the scientific excellence of the shared research challenge, the quality of training, supervision, and networking opportunities, while IF could focus more strongly on the applicant's scientific proficiency, research independence, career maturity and the expected impact of the individual project.
- Applicants should not be penalised for wanting to continue their research trajectory in the same country after a PN fellowship, especially where relocation would create family or personal barriers.

An exception to the mobility rule for PN fellows applying to IF, or clearer rules on consecutive participation, could help avoid exclusion effects.

- **Oversubscription** could be managed through the **strategic use of evaluation criteria** that emphasise differences in the objectives of the two actions (e.g. training and supervision in PN versus research independence and career maturity in IF), or by placing greater emphasis on impact in PN and excellence in IF. Maintaining a resubmission threshold could also be considered.

5. Staff Exchanges

5.1. What are your views on the simplified and more flexible Staff Exchanges structure, particularly regarding its capacity to deliver effective international, intersectoral and interdisciplinary exposure? What should be avoided to ensure that the action remains focused and impactful supporting skills development and institutional cooperation objectives?

- **Greater flexibility** in the duration and organisation of secondments is welcomed, as it could help consortia adjust more effectively to scientific opportunities and partnership needs, while facilitating more responsive project management.
- At the same time, the action should not become a general mobility instrument with limited scientific or training value. **Staff Exchanges should remain clearly linked to research and innovation** objectives, skills development, knowledge transfer and institutional cooperation.
- **The quality and purpose of secondments** should remain central. Each exchange should have a clear scientific, methodological, training-related or institutional objective, with a defined contribution from the host partner and expected outputs for the project.
- The **intersectoral dimension** should remain visible and encouraged. While some same-sector secondments may be useful, they should not weaken the role of Staff Exchanges in promoting cooperation between academic and non-academic actors.
- The **participation of administrative staff should be carefully limited** to cases where their role is directly linked to the project's research, innovation, management capacity or institutional cooperation objectives.
- A more **adequate funding structure** should also be considered, to reflect the full scope of project-related work. Significant project-related work takes place outside secondment periods, including preparation, publications, follow-up and coordination activities, and this effort should be better reflected in the funding model.
- Extending beneficiary status to third-country organisations would require careful consideration of challenges related to research security, IPR, and administrative complexity.

5.2. *How could Staff Exchanges be further improved to provide greater flexibility in managing secondments, and what adjustments could further strengthen skills development and enhance the added value generated through R&I partnerships?*

- Consortia should be able to **adjust secondment plans** during implementation – including timing, duration and distribution of person-months across partners – without requiring formal amendments where the overall objectives, partnership structure and total number of person-months remain unchanged.
- The action should move towards **competency-based outcomes** rather than detailed mobility schedules. Each secondment should be linked to a clear work plan identifying the tasks to be carried out, the role of the host partner, the skills or expertise to be developed and the expected outputs, such as a publication draft, methodological report, dataset, prototype, training material or follow-up proposal.
- The **top-up allowance** should be increased to better reflect the actual costs of mobility, preparation, follow-up, coordination and supervision.
- In some cases, allowing part of the budget to be used to hire additional researchers, specialists or sectoral experts could better support the project objectives when specific expertise is needed locally or when the added value of mobility is limited.
- **Implementation stage accountability should be strengthened.** Reporting should verify whether the exchange produced the expected scientific, methodological, training or institutional value and contributed to longer-term R&I cooperation between partners.

5.3. *To further simplify the requirements at application stage and reduce administrative burden for applicants, how could the definition of Staff Exchanges proposals be refocused? (e.g. on the overall excellence and ambition of the research and innovation dimension, the skills, exposure, and professional experience to be gained by individual staff, rather than on detailed descriptions of planned research activities and secondment-by-secondment work plans).*

- **Proposals should focus more on the overall ambition, quality, and added value** of the collaboration. Applicants should clearly explain the scientific rationale for the consortium, the expected knowledge transfer between partners, the skills and professional exposure to be gained by staff, and the longer-term institutional cooperation the project aims to build.
- However, this should not mean removing the **substantive description of secondments** at application stage, which should remain detailed enough to make their added value verifiable. What should be simplified is the administrative and operational detail: fixed individual schedules, overly detailed day-by-day activity plans, and arrangements that are likely to change during implementation. Clearer templates and flexible planning windows could reduce burden while preserving accountability.
- Instead of fixed individual mobility schedules, **applicants could define work packages, broader knowledge-transfer objectives, expected competencies and flexible time periods for mobility.** More specific individual mobility or career development plans could then be prepared before each secondment.

ACA members co-signing the statement:

