

## Proposals for MSCA in Horizon Europe

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## Introduction

The Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) is a very successful scheme supporting the best and most promising scientists in Europe. The Guild welcomes the continuity for the MSCA instruments under Horizon Europe and emphasises the urgent need for increased investments in the scheme that currently lacks funding to support all the excellent proposals submitted to it. The Guild recommends that MSC (Marie Skłodowska-Curie) Doctorates and MSC Postdocs remain the main focus of the programme as these schemes have the biggest impact on the development of research talent, and the success of this instrument.

The Guild appreciates the Commission's efforts in improving the MSCA within Horizon Europe and is grateful for the dialogue with stakeholders in this context. This paper outlines The Guild's position on changes foreseen for the programme, based on the feedback of our member universities that are long-standing participants of the MSCA and dedicated to ensuring that the scheme remains as successful, impactful and appreciated as it has been over the past years.

## 1. MSC Doctorates

### 1.1. Support for joint doctoral degrees

The Guild acknowledges MSC Doctorates as a successful instrument, which has its distinct added value in being flexible and open to different kinds of collaborations. We recommend that joint

degrees would remain an option for those doctoral networks willing to work together in this direction. The Guild is not in favour of an increased focus on the European Joint Doctorates (EJD), especially if this means providing more support to this implementation instrument at the expense of the European Training Networks (ETNs). We would also like to stress that establishing joint degrees is often burdensome due to the different administrative and legal requirements existing in different countries. Such issues might shift the focus away from the benefits of mobility, internationalisation and collaboration, which should remain at the core of this scheme.

### 1.2 Options to improve the success rate

#### *a) Resubmission restriction based on the quality of the application*

The best way to address the low success rate of highly popular schemes like the MSC Doctorates would be to increase the budget for MSCA. Limiting resubmission of applications based on the quality of the submitted application might reduce the number of proposals and increase the success rate of the scheme. However, in contrast to the MSC Postdocs which is a mono-beneficiary instrument, we are concerned that it will be very difficult to identify a definition for resubmission within a collaborative scheme. Because of the challenges in defining criteria for resubmission for collaborative projects, we advise that more in-depth discussions with stakeholders are undertaken by the Commission in order to reach a definition that is workable

for both applicants and evaluators. Such a definition should first be piloted before being rolled-out in a definitive manner.

In addition, we strongly recommend that any criteria developed to determine resubmission should be defined only with regard to the excellence section of the proposal.

Finally, we advise the Commission to inform the applicants about their exact ranking. This would help applicants whose proposals were above the quality threshold (but remain unfunded) to better understand their score and positioning compared to the awarded proposals. This might also contribute to the reduction of applications.

#### *b) Reducing the duration and size of projects*

We are against reducing the length of projects, which could jeopardise the quality and efficiency of the training programme. Completing the PhD requires at least 36 months, whereas 12 months are needed for the recruitment process, setting up the network and making possible adjustments (e.g. in cases of fellows resigning from their post; delays in recruitment; individual fellows' mobility issues linked to obtaining visa, refugee status, etc.).

The Guild is not in favour of reducing the size of the projects, as we believe this might undermine their effectiveness and reduce their impact.

## **2. MSC Postdocs**

### **2.1. Options to improve the success rate**

#### *a) Limiting the target group to holders of PhD or equivalent degree*

Limiting the eligibility of this scheme to PhD holders or applicants with an equivalent degree could contribute to decreasing the number of applications whilst improving the success rate of the scheme. Among the options proposed by the Commission, this would be a preferable measure to introducing an eligibility criterion based on the scientific age of applicants (see point b). However, The Guild would like to draw attention to some negative consequences that this measure could bring: excluding candidates who have a comparable full-time experience in research might prevent the participation of researchers from countries where a

PhD is not a requirement, including countries in the Global South. It would also exclude the participation of industrial researchers or candidates with other career paths not strictly connected to academia.

#### *b) Eligibility based on the scientific age of researchers*

The Guild is not convinced that introducing an eligibility criterion related to the scientific age of researchers would be a suitable measure for improving the success rate of MSC Postdocs (currently known as "Individual Fellowships - IF"). Whilst several universities in our network already limit incoming candidates for the IF scheme to a younger cohort, in many countries the MSC IF is currently the only support scheme without limitations for scientific age for researchers. Therefore, many universities also support more senior candidates to pursue these grants. In many countries it is also the only scheme having an impact on attracting excellent researchers from abroad, who often are at a more experienced stage of their career.

It is also important to note that becoming an excellent researcher is a process of lifelong learning, requiring new competences from researchers of all ages. Limiting the opportunity to acquire new competences and experiences only to the youngest researchers would therefore go against the nature of research careers. More and more academic institutions are introducing structured training and career development schemes for their doctoral candidates and postdocs in "qualifying positions". This is partly an effect of the MSC Actions.

Although The Guild does not support the limitation of scientific age in order to reduce the number of applications, in the case this measure will be introduced, The Guild recommends that the limit would be set to at least 8 years after PhD to address the concerns described above. In this case, the impact of the measure on the number of applications should be monitored closely.

The Guild also welcomes the re-naming of the MSC IF as MSC Postdocs, which will further help in communicating the main target group of the scheme.

### *c) Resubmission restriction based on the quality of the application*

The Guild recognises the need to increase the success rate of MSC Postdocs and to reduce the administrative burden caused by a high level of applications. Therefore, we propose the introduction of a rule for preventing researchers who score 70% or less in their evaluation from applying in the following year's call (similar to the practice currently used by the ERC). This would incentivise researchers to better plan the timing of their application and pay more attention to its quality, and lead to the reduction of the number of rushed applications.

We believe that this measure (together with the re-naming of the scheme) will address the challenge of oversubscription, but at the same time enable a wider group of researchers to continue benefiting from the grants. It would not exclude “more senior” candidates aiming to move out of academia. Nor would it prevent those candidates from engaging with new disciplines, requiring them to publish in new academic outlets and needing access to new networks (e.g. when moving from basic to applied research). This would also enable targeted international mobility of postdocs who have not been able to be mobile before (e.g. for family reasons) and support candidates lacking specific qualifications or experiences for a professorship. Last but not least, the scheme would also remain relevant to incoming candidates from non-European countries looking to be trained in Europe.

#### **2.1 Widening Fellowships**

The Guild supports the continuation of MSCA Widening Fellowships (WF) in Horizon Europe as they address an important challenge for Widening countries – attracting international researchers to host organisations in Widening countries. Possible changes to the current WF calls should be introduced only after a full evaluation of the 2018-2020 pilot.

Although not formally recognised as MSCA fellows, researchers with high quality proposals are offered the same conditions as MSC-IF fellows. The 2018 pilot has shown that the scheme has encouraged more applications to the MSC-IF calls from Widening countries, and consequently increased the

number of fellowships in organisations in Widening countries. Whilst we fully support the further use of the Seal of Excellence label, we believe it should not be considered as an alternative to WF as it is governed according to national funding rules.

Other options being considered as alternatives to the WF scheme, such as funding former MSCA fellows to undertake their fellowship with a host in a Widening country, should complement rather than replace the current WF pilot in Horizon Europe. With an increased Widening budget this scheme could encourage ‘brain circulation’ of top researchers. If introduced, eligibility criteria should be carefully designed to ensure the commitment and quality of the extra duration period, but also to avoid overlaps with national funding schemes. It is important to have in mind that ‘brain circulation’ mechanisms should in the long run make Widening instruments redundant.

The Guild welcomes the study that will determine the feasibility and the need for the MSCA return grants as envisaged in the Horizon Europe proposal. Since these would impact the MSCA budget, it is important to wait for the results of this study to ensure that MSCA return grants are introduced in line with the study's outcomes, and that the design reflects the return and reintegration needs across the European Research Area (ERA).

### **3. MSC Exchange**

The Guild recommends that MSC Doctorates and MSC Postdocs remain the main focus of the programme. Despite improvements made in Horizon 2020, the Guild considers the RISE scheme (now MSC Exchange) to be burdensome and administratively complex. The eligibility rules for the staff members involved in the project are hard to comply with. Allowances are sometimes too low to cover secondments in expensive third countries, with the result that beneficiaries need to find additional resources to cover the extra costs involved. A solution to the mismatch between allowances and real costs would be to award fewer projects with a slightly increased budget.

The RISE scheme is also rarely perceived as a staff-mobility programme, but rather as a scheme linked to a research project. If the goal is to foster

knowledge sharing and mutual learning across sectors and in collaboration with partners in third countries, then the scheme should focus on the evaluation of the plans for partnership and not require a joint research and innovation project that the application would be linked to.

#### **4. Continuous support to the development of Open Science skills**

The transition to Open Science will require raising awareness and training amongst researchers. We therefore recommend that the development of Open Science skills (e.g. skills related to public engagement/ outreach activities, open access, open data and data management, sharing data, research integrity) continues to be embedded in the training of doctoral candidates and postdocs. To maximise the benefits of tools already available, we advise that tools already produced by other EU-funded projects are brought to the attention of the beneficiaries of MSCA. This could be done by developing a toolkit or a guidebook providing an overview of the resources already available.

#### **5. Synergies between MSCA and other programmes and actions**

The MSCA should be open to synergies with all other relevant programmes and actions. For example, the links between the MSCA and the Structural Funds could be further enhanced, which would facilitate the possibility to fund MSCA applicants that have received a Seal of Excellence. To date, the use of this opportunity has been limited and we

therefore urge the Commission to discuss with Member States how this could be implemented more widely where relevant.

Synergies between MSCA and European Universities offer the opportunity to strengthen the collaboration of these networks within activities related to research. While under Erasmus+ universities can develop different schemes for the modernisation of PhD study programmes and for establishing new structures for training and career development, MSC Doctorates and Synergies schemes can contribute to the content of the training for researchers. To ensure complementarity between Erasmus+ and MSCA, policy dialogue or networks funded by Erasmus+ dealing with postdoctoral support and training could feed back their results to DG EAC and vice versa to ensure complementarity.

Synergies between MSCA and European Universities could also contribute to the sustainability of MSC doctoral programmes. In the past, training programmes developed under MSC ITNs have in many cases had limited impact on the institutionalised programmes and strategies for training of PhD researchers. European Universities can contribute to sustainability by fostering the structural integration of training schemes into the activities of the partner universities.



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