

CESAER

Unleash full potential of Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions

Position dated 14 May 2024

CESAER – the strong and united voice of universities of science & technology in Europe – welcomes the opportunity to provide guidance on the future orientations of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA). Our association has [contributed](#) to the interim assessment of Horizon Europe, supplemented by specific [input](#) towards the development of its successor (FP10). This position is an extension and enhancement of our previous submissions and is elaborated along four dimensions: (i) double the funding for the framework programme, including substantial boost for MSCA; (ii) unleash the full potential of MSCA; (iii) boost the capacity of MSCA to advance research careers; (iv) advance greening, visa facilitation, widening and synergies.

1) Double funding for framework programme, including substantial boost for MSCA

We welcome the recent efforts at the EU level aimed at providing researchers with [attractive and sustainable career opportunities](#) and [empowering research careers](#). The MSCA are the EU flagship funding instrument for doctoral and postdoctoral training, equipping researchers with new knowledge and skills through mobility across borders and exposure to different sectors and disciplines. The overarching goal of "developing talents, advancing research" highlights the significant and positive impact of the MSCA through the integration of these two areas. Thus, the MSCA are uniquely positioned to enhance efforts towards sustainable careers.

The MSCA already offer tangible career development opportunities and support, including funding, creating a multiplier effect. This multiplier effect means that MSCA have a significant positive impact on the broader system, far exceeding the funding used and extending beyond the individual projects funded. It contributes to boosting [modern and stable research careers](#) and to enhancing the [quality of research and innovation jobs](#).

Despite being highly valued and widely subscribed to by the research community, as is the case also for the framework programme for research & innovation in general, the MSCA have a low success rate due to budget constraints. Consequently, many high-scoring, excellent proposals remain unfunded, negatively impacting research in Europe and its ability to attract and retain world-class talent. The primary action at EU level, therefore, must be to ensure a substantial budget increase for the framework programme for research & innovation, including a substantial boost for MSCA.

- We call on the EU institutions to agree on at least a [doubling of the budget](#) for FP10, including a substantial boost for MSCA.

2) Towards unleashing full potential of MSCA including through independence

The MSCA have evolved over almost three decades into the extremely valued and impactful instrument we have today, and its future evolution should build on its successes.

A core feature of the MSCA that provides a unique value add at Europe level is the mobility aspect. However, it is incorrect to consider the MSCA as ‘just a mobility’ instrument, as they go well beyond this. Instead, the MSCA should be considered a key instrument contributing to the establishment of the [fifth freedom](#) in general, and specifically a key instrument for advancing research careers.

The MSCA have important and positive structuring effects for developing, implementing and disseminating best practices for research careers, and for connecting academic and non-academic research career paths, including private, public and semi-private sectors. All these areas are foundational for modern research careers and for increasing the quality of research and innovation jobs. The structuring effects include creating and supporting trailblazers, both individuals and organisations, that pave the way for others to follow. This trendsetter aspect is at the heart of the outsized positive impact of the MSCA.

The MSCA are uniquely placed to help address the challenges around researcher careers, including the balances that need to be elaborated and the evidence-informed developments that must take place along the dimensions outlined in our [position](#) ‘Supporting modern and stable research careers in Europe’. [Political guidance](#) in this area has also been provided.

To effectively advance research careers, it is essential to employ a combination of policy measures and funding mechanisms. Such efforts should be guided by directly involving experts and leaders within the research community in the strategic planning and oversight.

At the EU level, there is previous experience in establishing a body to ensure that the research community is directly involved in strategic planning and oversight: the European Research Council with its independent Scientific Council. For the ERC, a reason to set up an independent governance structure was to ensure the research community was directly involved in the strategic planning and oversight for advancing frontier research in Europe.

For the MSCA, the intention would be to ensure the research community is directly involved in the strategic planning and oversight for advancing research careers. One possible way forward could be the eventual establishment of an independent council for the MSCA, and this idea should be further explored among other possible alternatives to ensure form follows function and that such a council does not lead to additional administrative burdens and overheads or other unintended effects.

Regardless of the outcome, the departure point should be lessons learnt from the ERC and how its independent governance structure enabled more direct and deep engagement of the research community to advance frontier research, and adapting these lessons to the context of the MSCA and advancing research careers.

- [We call upon the European Commission to launch a study to investigate ways to enhance the research community's active participation in the strategic planning and oversight of the MSCA. The scope should include exploring the potential](#)

establishment of a 'Marie Skłodowska-Curie Council' with the objective to maximise the MSCA's potential as the EU level instrument for advancing research careers.

3) Boost capacity of MSCA to be a trendsetter for advancing high-quality research jobs

The MSCA, as a trendsetter in advancing research careers, should build on its achievements and foster collaborations among universities, industry, government and beyond. This will contribute to creating high-quality jobs in research and innovation. The concept of boundary-less research careers, spanning roles within and outside academia, is central to this.

In knowledge economies, citizens' engagement in knowledge-based jobs, including science and technology literacy, is beneficial. Universities play a crucial role in providing research-based education for future talent and leaders. While retaining talent within universities is vital, most individuals will pursue careers outside academia, contributing significantly to society.

Support structures facilitating career paths towards research and innovation jobs are essential, especially for early-career talent. This includes providing necessary competencies and skills and establishing connections with employers in the broader science and technology sectors. The MSCA are valued contributors in this area with potential for even more impact.

In addition to the highly valued [MSCA Doctoral Networks](#) and [MSCA Postdoctoral Fellowships](#), there are several additional valuable components and tools already existing, including, but not limited to:

- [MSCA COFUND](#) which is a co-funding mechanism to spread best practices by promoting high standards and excellent working conditions, thereby directly supporting the advancement of high-quality research & innovation jobs;
- [MSCA industrial doctorates](#) funding joint academia-industry researcher training where individual researchers spend time both in university and industry researcher context, often leading to opportunities for high-quality research & innovation jobs;
- [MSCA secondments and placements in the non-academic sector](#) which are add-ons at the end of fellowships to strengthen bridges between the academic and non-academic sector, where researchers receive additional support and salary to carry out a placement in a non-academic organisation, often leading to opportunities for high-quality research & innovation jobs.
- [MSCA staff exchanges](#) that involve organisations from the academic and non-academic sectors from across the globe, leading to career development for beneficiaries and knowledge transfer between organisations.

The value and impact of the MSCA stem from its unique approach of providing direct support to researchers, yielding immediate benefits to individuals, while also creating long-term, system-wide benefits. This is achieved through funding researchers and activities across numerous institutions throughout Europe and beyond. By linking individual and system-wide levels, it fosters constructive feedback loops.

- [We call upon the European Commission to continue existing components and tools, and encourage exploration of new innovative ones supported by additional budget,](#)

that directly foster the growth of high-quality employment opportunities in research, innovation, science, and technology sectors. Special emphasis should be placed on nurturing early-career professionals and young talents.

4) Advance greening, visa facilitation, widening and synergies

One of the elements that contribute to the beneficial structuring effects of the MSCA instrument is its sustainability-focused initiatives, such as the [MSCA Green Charter](#). This charter sets up a supportive framework that is connected to examples of good practice. A potential issue arises if the implementation of these greening practices results in a rise in actual costs, when these costs are not fully covered. It is encouraging to see ongoing discussions about increasing the amount allocated per grant to account for inflation-induced cost increases. This also presents an opportunity to ensure that any increases in real costs due to greening practices are taken into consideration.

- We call on the European Commission and the member states to ensure increases in real costs that stem from greening efforts are considered along with adjustments for inflation.

Given the significance of international and global mobility for MSCA, visa facilitation becomes a crucial aspect. Streamlining visa procedures could be immensely beneficial in terms of attracting and retaining global talent coming to Europe.

In the context of global talent and MSCA beneficiaries, we urge the following:

- Member states to eliminate barriers and guarantee efficient and prompt visa processing.
- The European Commission to assume a proactive role in visa facilitation, collaborating closely with member states to identify and remove barriers.

The MSCA play a significant role in [promoting 'brain circulation'](#) across Europe. For example, the initiative previously known as Widening Fellowships, now referred to as ERA Fellowships, has proven to be highly successful. However, we underline that the role of the framework programme for research & innovation is not to solve structural issues for example arising from anaemic funding levels at the national level.

We call on the EU institutions to:

- Continue monitoring and facilitating 'brain circulation';
- Take an active role towards resolving structural issues related to anaemic national funding levels, notably ensuring that the 3% GDP target for research & innovation, including a 1.25% GDP public effort target, is achieved by all member states by 2030 in an EU coordinated manner, as [proposed](#) by the European Commission.

An additional aspect of the positive structuring effort of the MSCA instrument lies in its ability to create connections and synergies with other EU funding schemes within Horizon Europe, such as the ERC and EIC.

- We invite the European Commission to identify and map the linkages and synergies of the MSCA with other EU funding schemes within Horizon Europe, with the objective to expand and enhance such synergies.

The MSCA is one of the best funding instruments of the EU. We offer our full support to contribute to its continued success for the second half of Horizon Europe and for FP10.

For more information and enquiries, please [contact](#) our Secretary General Mattias Björnmalm.

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