

# Empowering Innovation: MCAA's Recommendations for the MSCA in FP10

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MARIE CURIE ALUMNI ASSOCIATION

## Empowering Innovation: MCAA's Recommendations for the MSCA in FP10

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## List of Abbreviations

AI - Artificial Intelligence

COFUND - Co-funding of regional, national, and international programmes

EIC - European Innovation Council

EIT - European Institute of Innovation and Technology

ERC - European Research Council

ERA - European Research Area

EU - European Union

FP10 - 10th European Union Framework Programme for Research and Innovation

MCAA - Marie Curie Alumni Association

MSCA - Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions

NGOs - Non-Governmental Organisations

PI - Principal Investigator

R&I - Research and Innovation

SE - Staff Exchange

STSMs - Short-term Scientific Missions

## About MCAA

The Marie Curie Alumni Association (MCAA) is a global network with 20,000+ members from over 150 countries, open to any past or present beneficiaries of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA), not restricted to researchers, but including their supervisors and MSCA project managers. The MCAA aims to connect the MSCA community, supporting career development initiatives for MCAA members and advocating for research and researchers

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## Background

In response to the European Commission's call for consultation on the future orientations of the MSCA, the MCAA has developed a set of recommendations for the MSCA for the upcoming 10th European Union Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (FP10). This document is part of the MCAA's ongoing engagement in shaping research policy and builds upon our insights from a wide-ranging dialogue with our members across various disciplines. Our recommendations aim to enhance the effectiveness, inclusiveness, and impact of the MSCA to ensure it continues as a pillar of excellence and innovation in the European research landscape. The document is structured to address the questions raised in the European Commission's consultation, maintaining a format that alternates between questions and the MCAA's recommendations. Through this structured dialogue, the MCAA contributes to the broader policy discussions that will define the strategic direction of the FP10, advocating for a programme that supports a dynamic and diverse research community.

## General Questions

*A) What is your overall assessment of MSCA in Horizon Europe: what should be continued, reinforced, stopped, or modified, and what novelties could be introduced?*

The MSCA has substantially contributed to advancing Europe's research and innovation landscape. The following recommendations outline strategic directions for enhancing the programme's impact, inclusivity, and innovation capabilities. These recommendations are designed to strengthen the success of the MSCA, ensuring that it continues to serve as a cornerstone of European research excellence and innovation.

### Continue:

- **Established Programmes:** The Doctoral Networks and the MSCA Postdoctoral Fellowships have demonstrated significant success in fostering international, intersectoral, and interdisciplinary collaborations. We recommend that these programmes continue to support the seamless integration of diverse research disciplines and geographical boundaries.

### Reinforce:

- **Industry and Policy Collaboration:** Strengthening connections within industry and policy environments is essential. While the MSCA programmes, including the doctoral networks and postdoctoral fellowships, already encourage such engagements, reintroducing and refining specific panels that facilitate collaborations with NGOs, public bodies, and industries could further enhance the application of research outputs in real-world settings.
- **Global Fellowships Scheme:** Augmenting this scheme will enable more ambitious international research collaborations that address global challenges.
- **Proposal Structure and Evaluation Criteria:** Revising the proposal structure and evaluation criteria is needed, especially within the impact and implementation sections, to better distinguish the proposal quality. Incorporating criteria that emphasise inclusivity and alignment with the European Skills Agenda will ensure a more equitable and effective funding distribution.
- **Support for Researchers with Disabilities:** To achieve inclusiveness in research environments, ensuring equality and better support for researchers with disabilities must be a priority.

## Modify:

- **Supervision Oversight:** Establishing an oversight committee to balance and clearly define supervisory responsibilities within fellowships will democratise the guidance process and enhance the quality of supervision.
- **Monitoring of Training and Career Development:** It is crucial to enhance the oversight of training and career development activities offered through the MSCA programmes. Closer monitoring will ensure that these initiatives effectively enhance researchers' skills and professional growth.
- **Narrative Assessment of Research Impact:** Shifting towards a more narrative-based research assessment that takes into account and values a wider range of research outputs and research experiences, including impact, quality, career progression, etc., rather than focusing predominantly on quantitative metrics, will better capture the actual value of scientific contributions and will result in better quality assessment of proposals.
- **Regional Cost of Living Adjustments:** Implementing a regional coefficient for living allowances will more accurately reflect the varied cost of living across Europe, promoting fairness and attractiveness of the MSCA programmes.
- **Reversing the “Postdoctoral Fellowship” Terminology:** In line with previous MCAA recommendations [[ref](#)], the terminology from “Postdoctoral Fellowship” to “Individual Fellowship” should be reversed. Adopting the term “Individual Fellowship,” will enhance the perception of career progression and reduce research precarity, ultimately fostering a more supportive and professional trajectory for talented researchers striving towards tenure-track positions.



## (Re)Introduce:

- **Independence of the MSCA:** To tackle the future challenges of the evolving academic and research environment in Europe, it is essential to ensure the MSCA's independence. This is why the MCAA proposes the establishment of an independent governing body or council to set MSCA's strategic direction and oversee actions [[ref](#)].
- **Digital Transformation Training:** Introducing targeted training in fields such as data science and Artificial Intelligence (AI) will equip researchers with the necessary skills to thrive in an increasingly digital world.
- **Eligibility Criteria Revision:** Removing restrictions based on 'scientific age' will open the MSCA to a broader range of talented researchers, fostering a more diverse scientific community.
- **Incentives for Permanent Employment:** Incentivising institutions to offer permanent positions post fellowship will enhance career prospects and contribute to the sustainability of the European research workforce.
- **Career Restart and Reintegration:** The provision of fellowships for researchers seeking to resume their careers after a break due to personal or professional circumstances has proven invaluable. This initiative should be reinstated to ensure the resilience and continuity of research careers across Europe.
- **Special Funding for Commercialisation:** Establishing a fund similar to the ERC Proof of Concept could provide MSCA fellows with resources to explore commercial applications of their research, thereby enhancing innovation and societal impact and providing a bridge between the MSCA and the EIC programmes, enhancing synergies and maximising impact of EU research

*B) There are five main MSCA intervention areas in Horizon Europe, as listed in the Horizon Europe regulation, to which all Actions of the programme contribute:*

- *Nurturing Excellence through Mobility of Researchers across Borders, Sectors and Disciplines*
- *Fostering new Skills through Excellent Training of Researchers*
- *Strengthening Human Capital and Skills Development across the European Research Area*
- *Improving and Facilitating Synergies*
- *Promoting Public Outreach*

*Should these intervention areas be maintained in the future, should some be modified, and/or should other ones be introduced?*

All current areas should be maintained, emphasising digital transformation (including AI). As items to introduce, we recommend highlighting interdisciplinarity, incentives for projects and programmes aimed at sustainable research practices, and a new area focused on responsible research and innovation. The latter would ensure that MSCA projects consider the ethical implications of their research, engage with stakeholders and the public, and contribute to socially desirable outcomes. MSCA projects, especially DNs, should include training on transversal skills, such as academic integrity, public engagement, sustainable research practices, science communication, and science diplomacy. In addition, training should be provided to researchers to foster independent research and further their careers as Principal Investigators (PIs), as well as for careers beyond academia.

## Specific Questions to Consider

*Q1a: As a trendsetter programme, which novelties stemming from policy developments should the MSCA be championing in the future?*

The MSCA has the potential to lead transformation in research culture. Post-fellowship employability arrangements should be put in place to promote stability in research careers and combat precarious contracts. This would significantly impact the lost attractiveness of (academic) research careers and help retain the best talent. More specifically, we recommend that the MSCA:

- **Continues to nourish innovations in open science, data management, sustainability, the green transition, science communication and outreach, and AI as a supportive tool for research.** Furthermore, **researchers' mental health** should be a key area of policy focus to tackle in research, in particular for ECRs. The MSCA should be a champion of mental health in ECR by, for instance, providing further evidence-based guidance on the working conditions that foster sustainable mental health in academia. Indeed, this has hardly been explored by any funding agency worldwide. Besides nurturing research excellence, the MSCA should promote the role of **science in policy-making and diplomacy for responsible research and innovation** at the EU and international levels. It should also provide training to safeguard the freedom of academic and scientific research, research ethics and integrity, and research security, autonomy, and independence. Finally, the MSCA should also move from gender-related policies to **equity, diversity, and inclusion policies** and provide related training to funding recipients and hosts.

- **Development of Supervision Guidelines:** The MSCA should develop and provide more straightforward and detailed **guidelines on the qualifications and supervision experience required for supervisors**. To align with recent initiatives on alternative research assessment, the focus should be put on criteria beyond traditional metrics such as the h-index and number of publications. This approach would encourage a broader evaluation of supervisors, including their supervisory skills, contribution to the field beyond publications, and ability to foster a supportive research environment.

*Q1b: How could the MSCA strengthen its impact, including structuring impact on R&I institutions and systems and its contribution to emerging challenges?*

To enhance the impact of the MSCA on research and innovation institutions and systems and to contribute effectively to emerging global challenges, several key initiatives can be adopted:

- **Strengthening International Collaboration:** Collaboration with non-EU countries should be significantly enhanced by reinforcing Global Fellowships and schemes that facilitate the return of fellows to the EU.
- **Expanding Intersectoral Mobility:** Opportunities for intersectoral mobility and collaboration with the private sector, NGOs, and governmental bodies within and outside the EU should be broadened, facilitating a more comprehensive exchange of knowledge and expertise. For instance, establishing structured partnerships with industry leaders for joint research projects, creating fellowship tracks that involve rotations between academia and NGOs, and setting up secondment programs in governmental agencies can provide fellows with diverse, hands-on experiences.
- **Enhancing Engagement in Policy-Making:** Mechanisms for MSCA fellows and alumni to engage with policy-making processes should be improved and public engagement strengthened, increasing the societal impact of research.
- **Reinforcing Synergies with EU Programmes:** To create a more cohesive European research environment, synergies with other EU programmes and national R&I funding and policies should be enhanced.
- **Top-Up Funding for Collaborations:** Top-up funding should be introduced to encourage interdisciplinary and inter-institutional

collaborations across projects. Financial support for organising collaborative events should be provided to foster a culture of cooperation.

- **Recognising Collaborative Efforts:** To incentivise cross-project activities and highlight the value of collaboration in addressing societal challenges, the recognition of collaborative efforts, particularly at the MSCA presidency conferences, should be a priority.

*Q2a: What are the best opportunities for complementarities of the MSCA within the Framework Programme or synergies with other European funding programmes, especially Erasmus+?*

The best opportunities for complementarities of the MSCA within the Framework Programme and synergies with other European funding programmes lie in fostering interconnectedness and resource sharing among diverse research initiatives, including the following:

- **Shared Training and Mobility Framework:** A shared framework for training and mobility that allows researchers involved in the MSCA to participate in COST Actions 'Short-term scientific missions (STSMs) and Erasmus+ should be established. This could be facilitated through a unified portal that lists available opportunities across both programmes, with a streamlined application process that recognises the credits or achievements gained in one programme as applicable to the other. This would enhance the mobility of researchers, offering them broader experiences and networking opportunities.
- **Integrating STSMs from COST Actions with Secondments in MSCA:** Researchers on the MSCA fellowships (in COFUND projects) should be encouraged to undertake STSMs as part of their project's mobility. Similarly, participants in COST Actions could be

encouraged to apply for MSCA individual fellowships or COFUND projects, using their experience from STSMs to strengthen their applications. By encouraging cross-programme participation and recognising the complementary value of each programme's mobility schemes, the European Commission can significantly enhance Europe's scientific community's training, networking, and research output.

- **Synergies with the EIC and the EIT for Innovation-Driven Research:** For MSCA fellows focusing on innovation or commercial outcomes, establishing clearer pathways to engage with the EIC and EIT programmes could include tailored training in entrepreneurship, innovation management, and commercialisation, and create opportunities for MSCA projects to transition into scalable innovations through synergies with the EIC Pathfinder or support mechanisms like the EIT Knowledge and Innovation Communities.

*Q2b: 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?*

The Seal of Excellence could be widely coordinated with national and institute-specific funding schemes. The MSCA funding could use additional resources from other EU & research investment funds in order to better tackle global challenges. Deals with other funding agencies could be established to centralise the evaluation of candidates, optimise resources, and minimise the number of applications researchers prepare to guarantee funding.

## Innovation

*Q3a: What actions have worked best under the MSCA in Horizon Europe to support innovation? What could be improved?*

The MSCA has featured a bottom-up approach that encourages researchers to pursue independent research initiatives. This methodology has proven highly effective in fostering innovation as it empowers researchers to explore novel ideas and develop unique solutions without stringent thematic constraints.

Furthermore, the focus of the MSCA on training is of relevance for innovation. This focus allows MSCA projects (e.g. COFUND programme, doctoral networks), as well as MSCA postdoctoral fellows, to develop personal development plans around innovation when this is of interest. A tailored programme around innovation is crucial to prepare fellows for the innovation pathway, maximise the impact of their research project, and train the innovation leaders of the future. For instance, these training programs could include modules on creative thinking and problem solving, advanced communication skills, understanding the basics of intellectual property rights, conducting market research and analysing the competitive landscape, as well as developing business planning and financial management skills. These elements equip researchers with a comprehensive set of skills that are crucial for successful innovation in their respective fields.

The MSCA Industrial Doctorates under the doctoral networks also play a vital role in fostering innovation by bridging the gap between academia and industry. Enhancing the attractiveness and effectiveness of these doctorates could further strengthen the innovation ecosystem.



## Suggestions for Improvement:

To further enhance the innovation potential of the MSCA, proposals that demonstrate originality and independence from the supervisor's ongoing research should be particularly valorised. This can ensure that the MSCA funding catalyses new research directions rather than extends the supervisors' existing projects. To support this, we recommend:

- **Adapt Proposal Structure:** A specific section within the application where applicants must explicitly describe how their proposed research is original and primarily driven by their intellectual curiosity should be introduced.
- **Shift Focus from the Supervisor's Role:** In the evaluation process, the emphasis on the supervisor's CV should be reduced. Instead, focus should be put on the proposal's innovative aspect and the applicant's independent research ability.
- **Separating Funding Streams:** Proposals that serve mainly as an opportunity for supervisors to secure postdoctoral funding should be redirected to other funding schemes designed to support senior researchers or group projects.
- **Analyse Industrial Doctorate Attractiveness:** Investigate through surveys and focus groups why industrial doctorates, particularly those involving SMEs, may not be appealing to industry sectors. Identify specific challenges, such as limited staffing or lack of research expertise within SMEs, and consider adjustments to the program to better meet the needs and expectations of both SMEs and larger industry players.

*Q3b: How can we further encourage collaborations that are conducive to innovation and how to further promote entrepreneurial competences and skills among fellows?*

To further encourage collaborations conducive to innovation and promote entrepreneurial competencies among fellows within the MSCA, several initiatives can be implemented, such as:

- **Interdisciplinary Innovation Hubs:** Existing hubs that bring together researchers from different disciplines to work on joint projects, enhancing interdisciplinary collaboration, should be supported and integrated within the MSCA network.
- **Networking and Matchmaking Events:** Networking, matchmaking, or speed dating events for potential collaborators from various sectors should be organised to foster connections, initiate collaborative projects and maximise the impact of MSCA projects.
- **Entrepreneurship Bootcamp and Workshops:** Entrepreneurship bootcamps and innovation workshops could be held within the MSCA to equip researchers with essential entrepreneurial skills and encourage innovative thinking (e.g. iGem).
- **Industry Placements and Fellowships:** To better integrate academic research with industry, placements or fellowships where the MSCA fellow is fully embedded in a company should be encouraged. Furthermore, communication of established innovation services with MSCA fellows, such as the Horizon Results Booster, should be improved.
- **Flexible Secondment Planning:** To enable more relevant and practical secondment opportunities, the timing for developing detailed secondment plans for the post-recruitment of all fellows should be revised, allowing adjustments based on their specific skills and interests.

- **Encourage and promote industrial postdoctoral fellowship:** To encourage and promote postdoctoral fellowships with industry (including SMEs) as host institutions.
- **Extension of Industrial Doctoral Networks:** In order to strengthen academia-industry collaborations and to address the perception that time spent in the non-academic sector is also valuable, the duration of fellowships within Industrial Doctoral Networks should be increased to 5 years, matching that offered in Joint Doctoral Networks.
- **Proof-of-Concept Funding Mechanism:** To facilitate the application of research outcomes, bring them closer to market, and bridge the gap between academic research and commercialisation, a proof-of-concept funding mechanism should be introduced. This mechanism could be effectively implemented in collaboration with local technology transfer offices, ensuring that it is tailored to reflect and meet the specific needs of the local market.

*Q4a: 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?*

Attracting high-level foreign talent and expertise through the MSCA is essential, especially in fields where Europe has knowledge/skills gaps, and/or high needs, such as sustainability, quantum computing, AI and climate change. Enhancing capabilities in these critical areas can significantly boost Europe's competitiveness and innovation capacity.

#### **Strategies to Attract High-Level Foreign Talent:**

- **Targeted Promotion Campaigns:** MSCA should create field-specific promotional campaigns to attract high-level foreign expertise.

- **Global Fellowships:** MSCA Global Fellowships should be expanded to facilitate robust collaborations between non-European researchers and European institutions, encouraging knowledge exchange and long-term international partnerships.
- **Exchange Schemes:** Schemes integrating foreign experts into ongoing European projects should be implemented, ensuring substantial contributions and seamless integration into the research ecosystem.
- **Addressing Precarity:** To enhance attractiveness and sustainability, the issue of precarity should be addressed by offering longer-term contracts or clear pathways to permanent positions. Additionally, it is crucial to allow the work contract for the PF to be provided by the outgoing phase country. Relying on a European host institution for the work contract while the researcher is based outside Europe is often not beneficial. Providing the contract from the outgoing phase country would ensure better benefits and support for the researcher.
- **Promote MSCA Benefit Package:** The MSCA fellowship benefit package is a key factor in attracting top talent and ensuring a positive experience for fellows. However, there is room for enhancement to better meet the needs of researchers and their families. Strengthening the package with comprehensive relocation support, such as a starting bonus for moving expenses and tailored assistance with visas, local regulations, and essential services like national insurance, banking, and healthcare, is crucial. Additionally, fostering peer support networks—whether through academic institutions or MCAA chapters—can build stronger community connections.

*Q4b: What measures applicable to the MSCA could be reinforced to protect EU interests and assets, and which new ones could be introduced?*

To safeguard European interests and ensure compliance with EU security standards within the MSCA, targeted enhancements and new initiatives are necessary, particularly in sensitive fields.

#### **Enhancements and New Measures:**

- **International Restrictions:** Specific restrictions on Global Fellowships in sensitive areas such as quantum computing, cryptography and defence research should be implemented to align projects with EU security policies.
- **Intellectual Property and Data Protection:** Guidelines and support around intellectual property rights management and EU data protection standards within MSCA projects should be strengthened. This ensures that all participants are well-equipped to protect and effectively utilise intellectual property.
- **Open Science and Security:** Open science practices should be integrated with tailored security protocols, balancing transparency with protecting sensitive information. Open Science principle “as open as possible and as closed as necessary” should be followed.
- **Security Training:** A comprehensive training module for MSCA participants that covers ethical research practices, cybersecurity, and data protection should be introduced to enhance awareness and handling of security risks.

*Q4c: 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 improve cooperation with low and middle-income countries in the MSCA, focused efforts on partnership development, capacity building, and equitable knowledge exchange are essential:

- **Promoting Host Opportunities:** These countries need to be actively promoted as viable hosts for Postdoctoral and Global Fellowships, especially in fields like global health, climate change, and peace studies (e.g. via targeted promotion, myth-busting sessions).
- **Matchmaking Events:** Online matchmaking events should be organised to connect potential MSCA applicants with institutions in low and middle-income countries to foster long-term collaborations.
- **Expanding Fellowship Eligibility:** Global Fellowships' eligibility should be adjusted to allow low and middle-income countries' institutions to host fellows, facilitating knowledge transfer back to the fellows' home country after training in the EU or associated countries.
- **Performing Assessment:** Performing assessment in the low and middle-income countries to ensure that a proportion of the MSCA fellowships are hosted in these regions, promoting more inclusive research opportunities.
- **Reintegration Career Grants:** Grants to support returning MSCA fellows in applying their skills effectively in their home countries should be initiated, combating brain drain.

- **Training and Awareness:** Training for research offices in institutions in low and middle-income countries on managing international projects should be boosted, and helpdesk-type communication avenues should be set up to enable a direct channel of support for host institutions. Awareness should be increased about the benefits and successes of hosting MSCA fellows. On the other hand, training for institutions in high-income countries on handling equitable partnerships and ethical project management should also be boosted
- **Adjusting Supervisor Support:** Supervisors in low and middle-income countries should receive additional support to balance compensation disparities, enhancing the attractiveness and sustainability of these roles.

*Q4d: Should a dedicated fellowship scheme be created to support researchers at risk? Should such a scheme, if desired, be situated (in the MSCA, in other parts of the Framework Programme, outside the Framework Programme), and why?*

A dedicated fellowship scheme should be established to support researchers at risk, aligning with European values, including protecting academic freedom, preserving knowledge and expertise, promoting diversity and inclusivity, humanitarian imperatives, fostering global scientific collaboration, and contributing to peace and stability. This scheme should be situated as a transversal support element across all Horizon Europe pillars, ensuring it enhances the program's overall impact. Such an initiative demonstrates Europe's commitment to these core values and strengthens its reputation and attractiveness as a destination for excellence. The scheme must inclusively define the concept of 'researchers at risk', focusing on the nature of the risks they face rather than their location, ensuring fair and transparent criteria for support.

*Q5a: 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 participation from widening countries. What other incentives could be designed to increase widening participation and success rates?*

The MSCA should implement specific incentives to foster a more inclusive research environment that encourages diversity in scientific inquiry and enhances participation from widening countries. We recommend:

- **Pre-Application Support Services:** Beyond the general support offered by National Contact Points, pre-application support services, similar to a 'helpdesk', should offer detailed feedback on draft proposals tailored explicitly for candidates from widening countries.
- **Collaborative Training Networks:** Collaborative training networks should be developed in advance to host fellowships, promoting skill development and knowledge transfer.
- **Enhanced Use of Twinning Initiatives:** Existing twinning initiatives, such as the "Twinning Bottom-Up" under Horizon Europe, should be leveraged to further facilitate knowledge exchange and capacity building between institutions from widening countries and stronger research ecosystems. This approach should focus on expanding these initiatives to cover more disciplines and increase their impact.
- **Increased EU Financial Contribution in COFUND:** The EU's financial contribution for widening countries within the COFUND scheme should be increased to reduce the burden on the host institutions



and enable competitive salaries and better research conditions, levelling the playing field for these regions.

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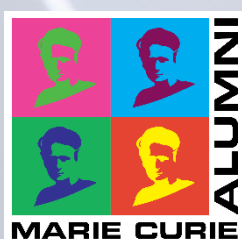
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