



# Towards FP10: EU-LIFE's vision for Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA)

EU-LIFE's feedback to the EC consultation on the future orientations of MSCA

February 2024

## TOWARDS FP10: EU-LIFE's vision for MSCA

Without researchers, there are no discoveries paving the way for scientific, social, economic and technologic innovation. [MSCA – Marie Skłodowska Curie Actions](#) is a fundamental programme to attract, retain and circulate talent across Europe, support the career development of researchers from their early stages, including diverse career paths, and foster a culture of open science, responsible research and collaboration between organizations within the research ecosystem. In FP10, the next Research & Innovation programme, the MSCA programme must continue as an essential part contributing to excellence in Europe through support to its researchers.

In the context of the current MSCA consultation, we hereby outline EU-LIFE's vision for MSCA in FP10. This is part of EU-LIFE's contribution to the policy debate on the next Framework Programme and follows the position paper [EU-LIFE's 10 Guiding Principles for FP10](#) launched in January 2024.

We provide a two-level vision for MSCA: **a realistic and an ambitious vision for MSCA.**

### Be realistic: Secure a strong MSCA keeping its current scope with commensurate budget

The scope of the programme and its key features are fit for purpose to boost research careers and they should be maintained and strengthened with a commensurate budget.

For that we recommend:

- ✓ Continue MSCA's **bottom-up, excellent research** approach and the promotion of **mobility** and **interdisciplinarity** throughout.
- ✓ Keep **early and mid-career researchers** at the core of MSCA and promote increased **capacity of research organizations** regarding training, supervision and mentoring of its staff.
- ✓ Enforce MSCA's pivotal role in promoting **high standard research culture** across Europe, including the promotion of open science, responsible research, diversity, equity, and inclusion within the research community.
- ✓ Increase the **investment on MSCA programme** within FP10 budget allocation to allow for the intended impacts.
- ✓ Increase **flexibility of rules** and **criteria** to allow for the intended impacts.
- ✓ Continue **pioneering innovative initiatives** at the concept and implementation levels.
- ✓ Seek **synergies** with other schemes that support excellence and innovation.
- ✓ Reduce **administrative burden** for applicants and beneficiaries.

### Be ambitious: Envision enriching the MSCA in and beyond its current scope with additional funding

Yet, thinking about the future, what would a more ambitious MSCA look like? How could the programme be enriched, synergized or complemented to provide wider impact? To achieve this second level, an additional budget investment would be critical.

Concrete suggestions from EU-LIFE community include, among others:

- Create an **MSCA-to-ERC funding scheme** to promote a continuum in research careers in Europe, with additional funds to those already allocated to MSCA.



- Create an **MSCA Proof of Concept scheme** to promote innovation pathways and inspire an innovative mind set for researchers, with additional funds to those already allocated to MSCA.
- Create a **collaboration platform for active MSCA projects** to boost collaboration among MSCA fellows and joint training efforts for hosting institutions.
- Create a **match-making platform** to identify opportunities for excellent yet unfunded MSCA proposals and private funders.
- **Apply country correction coefficients (CCCs) broadly**; and explore and test a **more granular model** of CCCs at region or city level.
- Promote global talent attraction by creating **joint mobility schemes** with other regions of the world, with additional funds to those already allocated to MSCA.

EU-LIFE's vision for MSCA is based on an internal consultation to the EU-LIFE member institutes from 15 countries across Europe. The EU-LIFE community provided over 50 recommendations and proposals on overarching topics such as **Novelties, Flexibility and Modifications** (11 ideas); **Funding** (10 ideas for EU and national, in and beyond MSCA programme); **Capacity building, Recognition and Networking** (9) and **Administrative burden** (8).

**Full EU-LIFE's reply to the EC consultation on the future orientation of MSCA** below.

## EU-LIFE's feedback to the EC consultation on the future orientations of MSCA

Hereby, we provide EU-LIFE's reply to the European Commission's consultation on the future orientations of MSCA. The reply is based on an internal consultation to the EU-LIFE member institutes from 15 countries across Europe.

### GENERAL QUESTIONS

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

The MSCA is a very valuable programme for Europe that should be protected and further strengthened. Two crucial aspects for the programme are to **increase the overall funding allocation to MSCA**, in order to guarantee that excellent proposals do not remain unfunded; and to **continue its bottom-up, excellent research approach**, as excellent research is essential for innovation.

*To be continued in FP10:* MSCA should **continue to promote excellence, international mobility, as well as gender equality and overall diversity in research** through targeted policies. Fellowships and training opportunities for **researchers at early career stages** should continue to be the core of the programme, and the bottom-up approaches should be maintained. Increased **flexibility in MSCA rules** in Horizon Europe (e.g. allowing change of family status during project implementation, long-term leave and special needs allowance) are an improvement as compared to H2020 and should be maintained.

*To be modified in FP10:* All instruments would benefit from measures to streamline application processes and **reduce bureaucratic hurdles** for applicants and beneficiaries. There are **challenges regarding attractiveness of MSCA schemes** for fellows and host organizations in several European countries. These challenges must be thoroughly address and mitigated. One possibility could be to broaden the use of the **country correction coefficients (CCCs)** to all MSCA schemes. In addition, given the discrepancies of the cost of living across the same country, especially for those large EU countries, it would be relevant to consider revising the CCC model for more granularity at the level of city or region (and not only country). We understand it is a complex task. We hypothesize that this concept could be piloted in the first work programme of FP10 and fine-tuned subsequently towards a more granular, revised concept of CCC in subsequent years.

*Novelties for FP10:* **Further promote the capacity of research organizations on training, supervision and mentoring** of doctoral candidates across Europe. This could be piloted through the creation of a **dedicated CSA grant scheme** in the MSCA programme specifically for capacity building for research performing organizations.

Create an **MSCA platform to facilitate the collaboration** among researchers and teams in **active MSCA projects** and enable synergies to co-develop activities such as training, courses and events. This would foster bigger networks and increase the impact, and potentially the training quality.

*Additional challenges:* MSCA programmes may not be contributing enough to the highly needed **closing the gap** between less and high performing countries. Likewise, MSCA programmes should ensure the contribution to promotion of **career sustainability** rather than precarity through successive unstable working conditions for researchers. These challenges call for continuous reflection.

There are challenges that go beyond MSCA programmes but can jeopardize their overall impact indirectly. One of them is the generalised crisis regarding **access to affordable housing and child/family care** in many regions and cities across Europe, which can critically reduce the attractiveness of MSCA programmes for researchers – and especially PhD students and post docs. A coordinated approach with other sectors is highly challenging but necessary to tackle the negative effect of these broader factors into MSCA schemes.

Below we provide specific feedback by MSCA instrument:

**MSCA Postdoctoral Fellowships (MSCA-PF): to be continued and reinforced.** MSCA-PF is a valuable instrument to support excellent researchers in Europe and thus strengthening the European Research Area. This instrument should receive more funding to increase success rates.

*Modifications:*

- Offer 3-years funding instead of 2-year to ensure better research career perspectives for postdocs, given the transnational mobility.
- In Global Postdoctoral Fellowships, increase the mandatory 12-month return phase to a host organisation to 18 months to consolidate collaborative exchange.

*Novelties:*

- Recognise and support the supervisors of MSCS-PF grantees through the creation of a network of supervisors to share experiences and provide them with possibilities to improve their skills that ensure a good environment for excellent research.

**MSCA Doctoral Networks (MSCA-DN): to be continued and reinforced.**

*Modifications:*

- Increase the overall funding of Doctoral Networks to allow covering the 4<sup>th</sup> year of registration of doctoral candidates in all (not only JD<sup>1</sup>) modalities in Horizon Europe (i.e. standard DN, JD and ID<sup>2</sup>), as in many countries the duration of a PhD is 4 years.
- Revise the concept of Joint Doctorate to become less administratively heavy and less restrictive; and acknowledge the fact that joint (double, multiple) doctorates are simply not feasible in all cases.
- Allow for host organisations to add costs for university fees in the application in addition to Research, Training and Networking (RTN) costs. This is particularly relevant in those countries where fees are charged and not waived.
- Include a revision of the secondment plans for all the doctoral candidates as soon as they are hired, so that the plans are tailored to each specific doctoral candidate. Currently, the secondment plans that are initially included in the proposal can be hard to keep since they are envisioned before hiring the doctoral candidates, thus without consideration of their specific expertise and interest.

*Novelties:*

- Incentivise and support the role of the project manager of MSCA networks through the inclusion of a unit cost for coordinating expenses that can enable hiring a project manager.

**MSCA-COFUND: to be continued and reinforced.**

*Modifications:*

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<sup>1</sup> JD, Joint Doctorates

<sup>2</sup> ID, Industrial Doctorates

- Revise the evaluation criteria of the candidates. Allow for more flexibility in key criteria by including criteria such as fit between the candidate and the project, and emphasize further the skills in addition to the classic publication-based research assessment.
- Strengthen the sustainability of COFUND projects to leverage their impact (namely on institutional change streamlined through the project) through providing additional funds to be used after the end of the project. Applicants interested in this possibility would need to complete a dedicated section on capacity building.
- Increase the focus on promotion of mental health through providing clear guidelines to applicants and evaluators.

*Novelties:*

- Implement better strategies with other funding schemes, for example EU structural funds. This must include more simplified funding application processes when using these synergies.

**MSCA Staff Exchanges (MSCA-SE):** to be continued, with some modifications as they can be administratively very demanding.

*Modifications:*

- Simplify and ease the administrative burden, for example by allowing the associated partners in low and middle-income third countries to be beneficiaries.
- Clarify eligibility of non-employed seconded staff.

**MSCA4Ukraine:** to be continued.

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?

The five intervention areas should be maintained in the future. In addition, the following area could be introduced:

- Foster international collaboration by facilitating partnerships with researchers and institutions outside the EU. This can enhance the global relevance and impact of MSCA-funded projects, as well as promote knowledge exchange and cross-cultural learning.

Additional transversal aspects should be considered:

- Well-being at work.
- Sustainable research, which should be visible in one of the intervention areas.
- Reinforce the sex and gender dimension in research.

It must be absolutely clear that it is a portfolio level impact, and therefore no single proposal is expected to excel in all intervention areas and transversal aspects. Likewise, requirements for each MSCA fellow should be offered as a portfolio and not as all mandatory.

## SPECIFIC QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

[Future ambition, vision and context for MSCA](#)

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

- Prioritize excellent discovery-driven research by correcting the current oversteering of Horizon Europe schemes towards “innovation via application”. Such reorientation is key to prevent that the current pool of results from fundamental research is plundered and innovation, inevitably, decreases.
- Contribute to high standard research culture in the host organisation, including the promotion of diversity, equity, and inclusion within the research community. This includes more support for underrepresented groups and a specific focus on inclusivity in institutional strategies.
- Promote the uptake of research assessment practices aligned with CoARA recommendations. MSCA is a strategic programme in which an evolution towards improved research assessment practices and indicators, in particular those regarding researcher careers and supervision practices, can be piloted and endorsed.
- Promote the recognition and professionalization of diverse careers in research, including those at the interface of science (e.g. research managers, tech transfer officers, training coordinators).
- Advocate for green and sustainable research practices, including the development of sustainable research infrastructure, eco-friendly laboratories, renewable energy-powered facilities, and carbon-neutral research practices.
- Steer the multi and transdisciplinary aspects of the projects towards more innovative, “out of the box” approaches that are effectively implemented beyond “ticking the requirements”. Allow for and recognize positively experimentation regarding, for example, cohorts of doctoral candidates that include co-creation between totally different fields such as biology and arts.

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

MSCA should continue to provide opportunities for early- and mid-career stage researchers to develop their skills, foster healthy research culture at the institutions and diverse career paths. MSCA should not broaden its scope since its strength is to provide Europe with talent in research.

[Synergies with other Union programmes + relations with national R&I funding and policies](#)

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

It is key that the existing gap between MSCA and ERC schemes is addressed. There is lack of support at European level for MSCA postdoctoral fellows in an advanced stage of their career to prepare/move towards their next step (i.e. apply for ERC funding). MSCA should facilitate strategic thinking for an academic career in the context of EU funding, provide researchers with opportunities to attract other fundings or help preparing for it (e.g. ERC starting grant). An “MSCA-to-ERC” scheme could be piloted, with additional funds to those already allocated to MSCA.

Researchers move across different types of research institutions along their career and this must be supported. This means that any incentive, programme or synergy must be open to all



types of research organisations. Therefore, whereas for example synergies with Erasmus+ are relevant, its scope regarding research and institutional research capacity must be broadened to the whole research ecosystem, including independent research institutes and similar organisations in addition to higher education institutions.

The lack of alignment between Horizon Europe and structural funds makes actual synergies very difficult. Better coordination of the overall EU funding structure, avoiding forced cross-links, is necessary to meet researchers needs and enable excellent science. Bureaucracy and administrative burden are a critical impediment when it comes to synergies and it needs to be improved if impact is to be seen.

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?

A critical impediment to use the Seal of Excellence is the administrative burden. Until this is addressed, it will be very difficult to use the Seal of Excellence comprehensively.

An approach to facilitate alternative funding for excellent projects that cannot be funded by MSCA due to lack of budget, could be enforced through national and/or international foundations. A match-making platform to identify opportunities for public-private matching funds could be developed to bring the funders and applicants with Seal of Excellence together. However, this cannot be an excuse to restrain the overall budget of MSCA programme at EU level, since the objectives and impacts differ from country to European level.

### Innovation

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

Measuring innovation is not straightforward, and it is impossible to predict where breakthrough innovations will rise. It is crucial to have funding instruments such as MSCA that are open for investigator-initiated proposals (bottom-up), be they fundamental research or more applied ones.

The perception from EU-LIFE community is that facilitating partnerships between academia and industry through programmes such as the MSCA-DN has been effective in fostering knowledge exchange, technology transfer, and collaborative research projects. By fostering a culture of open science and collaboration, these initiatives accelerate the pace of innovation and maximize the impact of research outcomes.

Importantly, it has to be clear that the innovation drive should not focus into the individual level but rather on an ecosystem/community level i.e. not all individual candidates of MSCA programmes should have industry secondments or an applicable edge in their projects.

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

Immersion in an R&D environment is the best way to help fellows develop entrepreneurial skills. Thus, it is important to continue to encourage strong and well-structured training programmes at the host institutions and provide additional funding for which MSCA fellows could apply once there is a realistic opportunity for a secondment in an industrial partner. At the implementation stage, it is critical that there is real flexibility to fine-tune secondment opportunities to boost collaboration between MSCA fellows and industry.



To support innovation in MSCA projects, an “MSCA Proof-of-concept” instrument, similar to the ERC Proof-of-concept, could be piloted with additional funds to those already allocated to MSCA.

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

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?

The best way to attract high-level foreign talent is to offer competitive salaries, highlighting the public/social benefits in Europe and other considerations such as better work-life balance and security than in other parts of the world. A separate, additional compensation for covering translocation costs could be considered.

A critical barrier has been the administrative load and issues with obtaining visas and other legal requirements at national level, which reduces attractiveness. A European approach to reduce this burden would be very useful.

If attracting talent from high-income countries is a goal, a separate MSCA instrument should be created for this purpose - but funding should not be taken from the existing programmes. This separate instrument could include:

- Customized training programmes to address specific skill gaps identified in Europe. These programmes could be tailored to the needs of high-income countries and designed to attract foreign talents/experts seeking opportunities for professional development and career advancement.
- A collaborative EU-high income countries scheme for mobility.
- Junior PI fellowships, to attract people from high-income countries and/or in areas with competence gaps.

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

Any measurements applicable to MSCA should follow the recent developments and EC guidelines on Research Security and be co-created with research institutions and the scientific community.

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?

For this cooperation to be successful, it needs to be attractive for both high income countries and low/middle-income ones.

For talent to go back to low and middle-income countries, there must be good conditions in these countries. This could be achieved through different mechanisms:

- 2-years fellowship in an EU country funded by the EU followed by a third year funded by the low or middle-income country upon return to that country.
- Follow-up grant/fellowship or an installation grant. This approach could be implemented in several MSCA actions. In addition, there should be additional funding to MSCA-SE programmes with low or middle-income countries to provide some seed funds to implement the good practices learnt by the staff in their home institution. The funds allocated to a specific programme should constructively consider the reality staff

will be facing when returning home, and the implementation of good practices in that context.

- Create mechanisms to continue support the international scientific network of the grantee when they move to the low or middle-income countries.

Another possibility would be to create incentives to co-develop individual research projects with shared co-supervision with international mobility between a European country and a low or middle-income country. However, the value for the high-income country has to be clear.

Q4d: 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?

Such dedicated scheme should be created with additional specific funding for it. If included in Pillar I, it should be a separate programme and fellowships for researchers should not just be awarded on the basis of excellence, since they pertain to people at risk.

#### Widening

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

Strategies to increase success rate from widening countries:

- Increase the support to applicants from widening countries (proposal writing workshops, professional reviews, etc.). As of today, MSCA applicants are supported through the host organisation during the application process and, although there exist research institutions' support groups, they aren't collaborating on the national level. Thus, MSCA fellows are relying on fragmented support. EU initiatives could reinforce the support provided by the National Contact Points and train staff working at them.

There are general improvements for MSCA schemes that can benefit all applicants, including having a more positive impact in participation of candidates hosted in widening countries. These improvements, for example, are:

- Offering more flexible mobility requirements or alternative forms of mobility, such as virtual exchanges or remote collaboration, which can strongly benefit researchers, including those from widening countries, with limited mobility opportunities, e.g., heavy family responsibilities.
- Simplify and streamline administrative processes to reduce the bureaucratic burden on researchers.
- Create mechanisms to encourage that widening countries provide longer-term contracts after the MSCA project is ended.

#### Additional contributions:

MSCA female postdoctoral fellows can be in a more vulnerable situation owing to their life timing, namely having children and a higher burden on family care. A "MSCA support programme for women", created with additional funds to those already allocated to MSCA, could reduce this higher vulnerability regarding the career of these researchers.



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