

No directionality in MSCA

Joint statement on the proposed introduction of directionality in the draft MSCA Work Programme 2026-2027

The Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) is one of the European Union's (EU) most successful programmes. Rooted in openness, excellence and mobility, it has consistently attracted and trained outstanding talent from across the world and contributed decisively to Europe's global leadership in research and innovation (R&I).

Through its bottom-up and non-prescriptive nature, the MSCA has empowered researchers at all stages of their careers. It has enabled breakthroughs in strategic areas such as AI, quantum, health, and climate, often *well before* these areas were politically prioritised. The programme is **already delivering on EU priorities** without the need for top-down thematic focus. What it requires now is **more support and funding**, not redefinition.

Recently, the European Commission (EC) presented a proposal to the Horizon Europe Programme Committee Configuration MSCA on the possible introduction of directionality into the MSCA. This proposal includes the establishment of targeted calls aligned with EU political priorities and the use of top-up funding from challenge-based components of the Framework Programme to support projects in pre-defined strategic fields and disciplines. Although the proposal states that excellence will remain a central criterion, such a shift would **fundamentally alter the MSCA's well-proven model towards a more top-down structure**.

We, the undersigned organisations, consider this proposal to be *deeply concerning*. Scientific excellence is not confined to pre-defined fields and mono-disciplinary research. Europe's long-term competitiveness depends on sustained investment across all areas of knowledge and interdisciplinary research. The EC's proposal risks undermining the very attributes that have made MSCA a gold standard.

Additionally, political directionality in MSCA would not help to solve the skills gap. By the time potential cohorts from directional calls are finally available, the sectors facing skills shortages will very likely have changed. Rather, it would distort a highly regarded programme that is critical for research careers. If the EU lacks talent in key sectors today, it is due to legal and regulatory barriers and underfunding in research systems. The solution is not to repurpose its successful model, but to **invest more in what already works and keep improving it**. MSCA *already* has all the potential to address the skills gap and related challenges.

In fact, the proposed shift fundamentally misdiagnoses the core challenges: **Europe suffers from persistent structural shortcomings in research careers**, such as precarity, insufficient career progression pathways, limited mobility and lack of long-term investments in research.¹

Through bottom-up, curiosity- and excellence-driven research, MSCA has proven to deliver successfully on preparing talent for emerging challenges. MSCA has funded **over 500 projects with a strong AI component** under Horizon 2020, with a notable increase in Horizon Europe, already counting more than 500 projects halfway into the programme. Since 2021, **over 2000 researchers** have taken part in training, mobility and international research cooperation in the field of AI: from AI in healthcare to robotics, AI for sustainability, machine learning, quantum computing, neuroscience or digital finance. On quantum computing alone, two recent internal mapping exercises from Horizon Europe (2021-2023) **show that over 170 MSCA projects contribute to the field**. With increased funding, the MSCA would be even better positioned to continue growing talent in emerging fields without introducing top-down calls.

We call on the EC and Member States to refrain from introducing directionality into the MSCA. This proposed shift is not only ill-timed, but also fundamentally misguided. Efforts to enhance Europe's competitiveness must avoid merging immediate political priorities with long-term talent development strategies. Instead, meaningful progress must focus on **addressing the structural challenges that research careers are facing** through initiatives such as the structural policy in the ERA Policy Agenda 2025-2027, the ERA Act or Choose Europe for Science.

Reorienting the MSCA toward areas where there are gaps in current skills development efforts would be a short-sighted misstep: a rushed and ineffective response to an issue the programme is already delivering on.

¹ OECD Science, Technology and Industry Policy Papers, "Reducing the precarity of academic research careers", May 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1787/0f8bd468-en>.

Co-signed by:

