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EU-LIFE's feedback to the EC stakeholder consultation on the future architecture of Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) in FP10

15 June 2026

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EU-LIFE welcomes the reflections from the European Commission (EC) on the future architecture of MSCA (Marie Sklodowska Curie Actions) in the next Framework Programme (FP10). MSCA is a key research programme for Europe and its talent, and it must be maintained and reinforced in FP10. For decades, MSCA has played an essential role in advancing excellent research across Europe, by supporting researchers at early and decisive career stages, nurturing talent, strengthening high-quality research in all scientific areas and improving research environments and institutions.

In FP10, the core strengths that have made MSCA successful must remain the foundation of the programme: scientific excellence, a bottom-up and research-field agnostic approach, high-quality training, international and intersectoral collaboration, and support to researchers at key career stages. This is essential for MSCA to continue strengthening Europe's research excellence and talent base, and to meaningfully contribute to competitiveness.

In FP10, MSCA should:

- **Preserve the excellence-driven, research-field agnostic approach and bottom-up nature of MSCA as a research programme.** New schemes, phases or network structures should not introduce directionality, narrow the diversity of research fields, or favour highly structured institutional models at the expense of scientific excellence. The strength of MSCA lies in supporting excellent researchers and excellent research ideas across the full range of disciplines.
- **Keep research and researchers' needs at the centre.** The future MSCA architecture should focus on excellent research, researchers and research careers, not primarily focus on managing oversubscription issues artificially. Oversubscription is a real challenge, but it should not be addressed mainly by restricting access to individual fellowships, or forcing researchers into linear pathways.
- **Ensure complementarity rather than sequentiality between instruments.** Network-based schemes can provide important added value where they offer genuine peer learning, mentoring, interdisciplinary and intersectoral exposure, and institutional scientific collaboration. However, they should complement, not replace, excellence-driven bottom-up individual opportunities for researchers who are ready to develop their own scientific trajectory.
- **Avoid unnecessary complexity.** Simplification should remain a genuine objective: additional schemes, phases, eligibility thresholds or structural distinctions should not create new complexity for applicants, beneficiaries or evaluators.
- **Match ambition with adequate resources and robust implementation.** New ambitions cannot be delivered through structural redesign alone. MSCA in FP10 should be supported by sufficient budget, proportionate administrative requirements, clear evaluation rules, and governance that combines efficient programme management with strong scientific and strategic expertise.

Hereby, we provide EU-LIFE's reply to the European Commission's stakeholder consultation on the future architecture of MSCA in the next Framework Programme (FP10). The reply is based on an internal consultation to the EU-LIFE member institutes from 16 countries across Europe.

GENERAL QUESTIONS

MSCA Doctoral Networks (MSCA DN)

- What are your views on the proposed architecture for the MSCA DN, especially with regards to flexibility and simplification?

The proposed changes of MSCA Doctoral Networks (DN) overall move in a positive direction to reduce unnecessary rigidity, better reflect the reality of doctoral training across different scientific and institutional contexts, and support a more feasible implementation. Provided that implementation conditions are carefully designed, several elements of the proposed architecture towards a more flexible and simplified architecture are positive. At the same time, there are points of caution that must be considered (see below).

A major concern that goes beyond the proposed architecture is the limited budget. Low success rates, and therefore the high number of unfunded excellent proposals, are concerning.

Views on specific elements proposed for MSCA DN in FP10:

Increase the maximum fellowship duration to up to four years within projects of up to five years: This change addresses long-standing limitations of the current MSCA DN model and is a major improvement. It better reflects real doctoral timelines, in addition to mobility requirements and the ambitious training objectives of MSCA Doctoral Networks, including interdisciplinary and intersectoral exposure. This change would improve the quality and feasibility of doctoral training across different national and disciplinary contexts and better support the career of researchers.

Streamlining the three DN types into a single configuration: There is clear value in a single, more flexible model that would allow consortia to combine different types of doctoral experiences within one project, where these add clear scientific and training value, without requiring the entire network to follow one doctoral format. This would reduce the complexity associated with Industrial and Joint Doctorates and could accommodate disciplinary diversity, different types of partner engagement, and more tailored doctoral pathways within the same consortium.

Points of attention and consideration:

- **Maintaining clear evaluation and implementation rules.** A single configuration may make proposals more difficult to compare and assess. However, evaluation must continue to be based on excellence rather than on favouring consortia simply because they include Industrial or Joint Doctorate elements. Clear guidelines will therefore be needed for applicants and evaluators, including guidance that is understandable for both academic and non-academic institutions. Recruitment procedures must also ensure sufficient involvement of supervisors, particularly at the final selection stage, while preserving open, transparent and merit-based recruitment. It is essential that supervisors have a clear, unbiased and formal role in recruitment decisions for fellows to ensure

scientific alignment, appropriate integration within the host environment, and high-quality supervision. Many academic institutions hold the HRS4R Seal and have made significant efforts to professionalise, monitor and strengthen the capacity of their research staff to make recruitment processes more transparent, fair and ensure the equal treatment of candidates, defining formal and unbiased roles for supervisors in the process. Involving supervisors at the final stages of recruitment will bring mutual benefits to fellows, supervisors and institutions alike.

- **Ensuring that flexibility does not increase management complexity.** Mixed doctoral formats within one consortium may require more tailored training, stronger governance, careful monitoring and additional management effort. This will need to be considered to ensure that simplification is real for host organisations and it does not add more administrative complexity in practice. The funding model should adequately reflect the coordination, supervision, training and management effort required, including sufficient resources for communal activities and network management. If these resources are insufficient, or if existing cost categories are too stretched, this risks undermining the quality and feasibility of DNs to deliver on their highly ambitious objectives.
  A specific suggestion is that unit costs under category B1 (research, training and networking activities) should better reflect the real costs of different types of doctoral research and training. For example, it is highly relevant to consider differences between resource-intensive experimental projects (e.g. wet-lab research) and less costly research formats (e.g. dry-lab research).

Providing more flexibility for secondments: This is a positive proposal, including defining secondment plans after recruitment and adapting them more easily during implementation. This would better reflect the individual needs of doctoral candidates and the evolution of research projects, making secondments more meaningful and realistic and improving quality overall. At the same time, increasing secondment flexibility would also reduce the administrative burden (e.g. fewer GA amendments) for all actors involved.

- Specifically on Industrial and Joint Doctorates, would the new proposed structure (i.e. not mandating that all fellows within a consortium must pursue the same doctoral type) encourage consortia to engage more in those doctoral types? Could a financial incentive for each Industrial or Joint doctoral fellowship be an effective way for consortia to engage more in those doctoral types?

The proposed structure could encourage more consortia to engage with Industrial and Joint Doctorates, because it removes the requirement that all fellows within a consortium must pursue the same doctoral type. A blended model would allow consortia to include Industrial or Joint Doctorate elements where they are scientifically and strategically justified, without making the entire network administratively dependent on more complex formats. This could lower barriers to participation, support greater disciplinary diversity, and allow doctoral candidates within the same network to follow different pathways according to their project needs and career ambitions.

However, this flexibility will only be effective if the rules remain clear and implementation is feasible. Mixed doctoral formats may introduce additional complexity for supervision, training design, governance, partner coordination and cohort-building. For Joint Doctorates in particular, the main

barriers are often legal and institutional rather than purely financial, including degree-awarding rules, joint supervision agreements, enrolment or tuition arrangements, and compatibility between national doctoral systems. For Industrial Doctorates, participation will also depend on whether non-academic partners, including companies and SMEs, clearly recognise the added value of hosting doctoral candidates.

Financial incentives, if applied, must be carefully designed in dialogue with the scientific community to understand both the real burdens and the potential risks. Where these formats create real additional coordination, supervision, legal, administrative or partnership costs, additional support could help make implementation more feasible. However, incentives should avoid creating a box-ticking effect, where consortia include Industrial or Joint Doctorates mainly to obtain extra funding rather than because they add genuine scientific and training value.

If some kind of financial incentives are introduced, they should be linked to clear quality and feasibility criteria, such as meaningful non-academic involvement, strong joint supervision, real added value for the doctoral candidate, feasible implementation arrangements, and clear integration into the overall network. They should also be accompanied by simplification tools, such as model agreements, clearer guidance, more flexible implementation rules and reduced administrative burden, especially for Joint Doctorates. The priority should be to make Industrial and Joint Doctorates easier to use where they are appropriate, not to make them mandatory or artificially attractive.

In any case, the incentive to embark on an Industrial or Joint Doctorate shall not provide by any means an advantage at the evaluation stage. The selection of DNs must remain excellence-based and this must be clearly highlighted to both applicants and evaluators.

MSCA Staff Exchanges (MSCA SE)

- What are your views on the simplified and more flexible Staff Exchanges structure, particularly regarding its capacity to deliver effective international, intersectoral, and interdisciplinary exposure? What should be avoided to ensure that the action remains focused and impactful supporting skills development and institutional cooperation objectives?

The proposed simplification and greater flexibility of the Staff Exchanges are positive developments, as these changes could strengthen meaningful international, intersectoral and interdisciplinary collaboration while reducing unnecessary administrative rigidity. The action should be clearly focused on skills development, knowledge exchange and genuine institutional cooperation, rather than on mobility driven mainly by administrative considerations. Therefore, there is also value on allowing same-sector secondments, as often these exchanges can truly leverage skills, capacity and collaboration. The administrative burden must be reduced to a minimum to ensure participation of organisations. Staff Exchanges generate the greatest added value where they are grounded in quality and complementarity of partnerships and long-term collaborative potential, rather than in formal compliance with detailed mobility structures or highly detailed secondment plans.

Reduced complexity, increased adaptability and more accessible rules would be also beneficial to reduce the entry barriers for new applicants and for third-country partners.

- How could Staff Exchanges be further improved to provide greater flexibility in managing secondments, and what adjustments could further strengthen skills development and enhance the added value generated through R&I partnerships in Staff Exchanges projects?

Exchanges should focus on clear added value, such as acquiring expertise, methodologies, access to infrastructures, sectoral exposure or professional experience that is not available at the home institution. This would include supporting skills development and exchanges of good practices among technical staff, research managers, grants offices, technology transfer offices and other research management units involved in R&I activities, where this contributes to the project objectives.

The programme should also place greater emphasis on durable collaborative outcomes beyond mobility itself. Staff Exchanges should remain grounded in knowledge transfer, complementarity of expertise, and scientifically meaningful collaboration rather than being a generic mobility instrument.

Finally, the restrictions regarding the requirements of the staff that could benefit from these secondments should be removed. In particular, it is welcomed the removal of the obligation to make the staff exchange at the beginning of the enrolment of the staff.

- To further simplify the requirements at application stage and reduce administrative burden for applicants, how could the definition of Staff Exchanges proposals be refocused? (e.g. on the overall excellence and ambition of the research and innovation dimension, the skills, exposure, and professional experience to be gained by individual staff, rather than on detailed descriptions of planned research activities and secondment-by-secondment work plans)

To further simplify the requirements at application stage and reduce administrative burden for applicants, Staff Exchanges proposals should focus on the overall excellence, ambition and strategic scientific rationale of the collaboration, rather than on detailed operational planning.

Proposals should be assessed primarily on the quality and complementarity of the partnership, the relevance of the expertise and infrastructures exchanged, the expected scientific, technological and institutional added value, and the skills, exposure and professional experience to be gained by participating staff. This would better reflect the dynamic nature of collaborative research, where specific activities and secondment plans often need to adapt during implementation to emerging scientific opportunities, staff availability and project needs.

Staff Exchanges would also benefit from a stable coordination budget alongside the secondment budget to support partnership building, training and project management. Schemes that implement such models, such as ERA Talent, could serve as inspiration. A dedicated matchmaking platform for secondments could further improve collaboration and efficiency.

NEW MSCA POSTDOCTORAL OFFER IN FP10

MSCA Postdoctoral Network (MSCA PN)

- What are your views on this proposed new action? What measures should be implemented or avoided to ensure it meets the needs of its target audience, namely early-career postdoctoral researchers?

The proposed Postdoctoral Networks (PNs) as a new action for early-career postdoctoral researchers could have added value, provided that: i) the scheme remains excellence-driven, open to all fields of research equally and bottom-up from the scientific community; the shared challenge should be proposed by the scientific network and selected through scientific excellence, not pre-defined through top-down thematic priorities; ii) the scheme is clearly centred on the scientific development and career needs of postdoctoral researchers. This is essential to preserve the MSCA added value, avoid excluding niche or emerging fields, and ensure that PNs remain open to excellent research across the full range of disciplines.

PNs should have a distinct logic from Doctoral Networks and should not become a second layer of doctoral-style training. Early-career postdocs could benefit from high-quality research environments, structured mentoring, peer learning, international, interdisciplinary and intersectoral exposure, and network-level added value. However, PNs should also support progressive scientific autonomy, project ownership and career development (both academic and non-academic), while ensuring sufficient protected time for research.

A central condition is that PNs should be complementary to, and not a substitute for, Individual Fellowships (IFs) at any stage of the postdoctoral journey. Early-career postdoctoral researchers have diverse profiles: some will benefit from a structured network environment, while others are already ready to pursue a more independent, investigator-driven project. Replacing access to IFs during the first postdoctoral years could create a gap in autonomy and funding opportunities for excellent researchers already prepared to develop their own research direction in their field of choice. This hampers the career development and the talent attraction needed across Europe. PN should therefore be introduced as one pathway within a flexible postdoctoral funding landscape, not as the only route available immediately after the PhD.

Measures to be **implemented** in PNs:

- **Excellence-driven, research-field agnostic and bottom-up evaluation of the shared challenge proposed by the scientific network:** The action must avoid any top-down pre-selection of topics or evaluation preference for pre-defined areas to preserve its potential to unlock emerging needs that are not yet in the radar of political considerations. This is the only way to preserve disciplinary diversity and ensure that all excellent research in any field remain eligible and competitive.
  Evaluation should also assess whether the PN brings specific added value for early-career postdoctoral researchers, including the quality and complementarity of participating groups, the strength of the scientific environment and mentoring, opportunities for autonomy and career

development, and meaningful interdisciplinary and intersectoral interactions rather than rigid predefined distributions.

- **Well-designed recruitment process for the benefit of fellows:** Recruitment should be open, transparent, international and merit-based. In this model, it is essential that supervisors have a clear, unbiased and formal role in recruitment decisions for fellows. Alongside with fairness, transparency and equal treatment of candidates, at the final stages of recruitment it is necessary to ensure scientific alignment, appropriate integration within the host environment, and high-quality supervision. Involving supervisors in recruitment can bring mutual benefits to fellows, supervisors and institutions alike. Many academic institutions hold the HRS4R Seal and have made significant efforts to professionalise, monitor and strengthen the capacity of their research staff to make recruitment processes more transparent where biased inbreeding is not allowed, that significantly define formal and unbiased roles for supervisors in the process.
- **Ensure researcher autonomy and project ownership:** PNs should support early-career postdoctoral researchers in developing their own research direction within the network. Fellows should not simply implement projects designed by senior investigators or institutions. They should have sufficient ownership of their individual research project and enough protected time for research as a key determinant of their career development.
- **High-quality supervision, mentoring and career development:** PNs should provide strong supervision and mentoring, while recognising that postdoctoral supervision should differ from doctoral supervision. Fellows should be supported to develop increasing independence, scientific creativity, project ownership and career direction. Career development should be adapted to different levels of maturity, disciplinary contexts and career ambitions, rather than imposed through a one-size-fits-all model.
- **Strong host environments and network-level added value:** PNs should ensure that fellows are embedded in excellent research environments with access to the infrastructure, expertise and scientific support needed for their projects to succeed. The network dimension should add value by broadening fellows' scientific perspectives, professional networks and career options beyond what an individual fellowship alone might provide.
- **Meaningful international, interdisciplinary and intersectoral exposure:** PNs should provide opportunities for fellows to develop international networks, broaden their research perspective and engage with different sectors or disciplines where relevant. This could include working in different research environments or host institutions, but such exposure should be scientifically meaningful and aligned with the fellow's project and career-development needs.
- **Flexible and modular training:** PNs should offer a flexible postdoctoral development framework around a strong common scientific core. Optional or modular training components could allow fellows to select activities according to their project, profile and career ambitions, including academic and non-academic career paths. Training should strengthen the fellow's development without overloading the fellowship or reducing protected research time.

Measures to be **avoided** in PNs:

- **Using PNs as a demand-management tool for oversubscribed IFs.** PNs should not be introduced primarily to reduce the number of IF applications. If the main objective is to address oversubscription, other approaches should be considered. PNs should only be introduced if they

respond to a genuine need-driven postdoctoral action and thus provide added value for early-career researchers.

- **Top-down or overly predefined research agendas.** The scheme must avoid pre-selecting challenges, prescribing research topics, or favouring certain areas beyond excellence-based evaluation. Prescriptive challenge definitions would reduce disciplinary diversity and weaken the excellence-driven, bottom-up nature of MSCA as a highly successful research programme.
- **Replacing early access to individual fellowships.** PNs should not narrow access to bottom-up IFs at a critical career stage. Recent PhD graduates and early-career postdocs who are already ready to develop an independent, investigator-driven project should not be forced into a network-based scheme as their only MSCA option.
- **Overly structured or training-heavy design.** An overly structured model could delay the acquisition of skills that are critical at this stage, including developing independent projects and preparing competitive grant or fellowship applications.
- **Evaluation focused mainly on the scientific strength and reputation of the consortium and principal investigators.** Evaluation should give sufficient weight to the quality of the proposed scientific challenge, the research environments, the development potential for recruited fellows, and the capacity of the network to support postdoctoral autonomy and career progression.
- **Artificial or overly predefined mobility and secondment requirements.** International, interdisciplinary and intersectoral exposure can be highly valuable, but secondments and mobility should not become rigid formal requirements that reduce project coherence or create unnecessary stress. They should be designed around the fellow's project, training needs and career objectives.
- **Rigid eligibility timelines.** Eligibility rules should not rely only on scientific age or rigid time-since-PhD thresholds. Such rules risk excluding strong candidates and reducing flexibility while harming multi and interdisciplinarity. The scheme should be inclusive of diverse postdoctoral trajectories, including career breaks, parental leave, sectoral mobility and different disciplinary norms. This would improve inclusiveness and attractiveness.
- **Excessive administrative complexity.** PNs should not introduce administrative complexity at proposal or implementation stage. The scheme should remain proportionate and focused on the scientific and career-development added value for fellows.

<u>Open questions and suggestions</u>:

Several implementation aspects would need further clarification. It should be clear who sets up the PN and defines the shared challenge, and how fellows will be able to shape their individual projects within the network. The role of mobility should also be clarified, including whether mobility before joining or during the fellowship would be required.

Given that PNs would represent a significant structural change in MSCA postdoctoral support, the action could be piloted or closely monitored during the first years, with a possibility of changing the trajectory if intended results are not clear. Feedback from fellows, supervisors and host institutions would help assess whether the scheme genuinely supports early-career postdoctoral development, autonomy, career progression, mobility, interdisciplinary and intersectoral exposure, and successful transitions to the next career stage, as well as whether it is an added value compared to IFs.

Risks of loss of COFUNDs in FP10 for institutional capacity-building:

If COFUNDs actions are discontinued in parallel with the introduction of PNs, it will be important to preserve the institutional capacity-building function that COFUND has played. Removing the mandatory co-funding principle could have positive effects, as co-funding requirements can be a significant barrier for institutions with more limited financial capacity and may have contributed to the uneven participation across Europe. However, COFUND has also enabled institutions to develop (e.g. institutions without the seal HRS4R) or strengthen their own doctoral and postdoctoral programmes, including open, transparent and merit-based recruitment practices, supervision models, mentoring frameworks, research support structures and long-term research career policies. The effects of COFUND have permeated through the research culture and policies of the whole institution, beyond the programmes they were specifically funding.

The institutional change enhanced by COFUND stems partially from its mono-beneficiary nature. Losing this COFUND function could reduce the strategic autonomy of institutions in favour of consortia-defined priorities. A shared cross-institutional challenge differs fundamentally from a long-term institutional strategy for developing research careers and improving practices. It would therefore be important to preserve in some mechanisms the capacity-building role of COFUND while reducing dependency on institutional co-funding. This would be relevant not only for institutions with less established programmes, but also for leading institutions that are often at the forefront of implementing innovative and ambitious new practices.

One possible option would be to embed this dimension in PNs, allowing both consortium-based and mono-beneficiary models, with fewer fellows in mono-beneficiary schemes. Such mono-beneficiary projects should still include strong elements of collaboration, shared training and institutional learning to maintain European added value and long-term institutional impact.

- In your opinion, what would be a suitable configuration for a postdoctoral network (number of institutions, fellows, duration, intersectoral distribution...)?

If PNs are introduced, they should remain scientifically ambitious but manageable in size, with enough institutions and fellows to create a genuine cohort effect while avoiding excessive administrative complexity or dilution of scientific coherence and individual support. The success of a PN should depend less on consortium size or structural complexity than on its capacity to support scientifically ambitious, independent and research-driven postdoctoral trajectories.

A suitable configuration could be a medium-sized network, for example around 5–8 core beneficiary institutions and around 10 postdoctoral fellows with some flexibility to slightly increase this number where scientifically justified. These could be complemented by a limited number of associated partners where they add clear value (e.g. scientific, training, intersectoral, societal). The possibility for some beneficiaries to recruit more than one fellow could also be considered where this strengthens local peer interaction, daily community building and institutional mentoring capacity.

While the scientific structure would be organised around a broad shared challenge, it would be important to ensure that each fellow has a clearly defined individual project, a strong host environment, appropriate supervision and access to the infrastructure and expertise needed for the project to

succeed. This would provide coherence at network level while preserving the fellow's project ownership and scientific development.

Regarding duration, fellowship length should be long enough to allow fellows to develop an individual project, acquire meaningful expertise, generate robust outputs, benefit from the network and prepare the next career step, but not so long that it unnecessarily prolongs the postdoctoral stage or discourages further mobility. A standard fellowship duration of around 36 months would offer a reasonable balance. The overall project duration could be around 48 months to allow time for recruitment, onboarding, project definition, training, secondments and final career-transition activities. In experimental fields, or where clearly justified by the scientific and career-development plan, an option for fellowships of up to 48 months could also be considered.

Intersectoral exposure can be beneficial for some postdocs, strengthening career development and expanding long-term career prospects. However, it should not weigh heavily in the evaluation, as it may not be suitable or equally relevant for all projects and fields. Intersectoral experience could be gained through secondments or other forms of engagement, but sectoral exposure and training opportunities should be driven by the fellow's needs, project objectives and career plan rather than by rigid requirements or predefined distributions.

- Are there any innovative training models that could work well for a network of early postdoctoral researchers, keeping in mind the international, interdisciplinary and intersectoral dimensions?

Training models for PNs should be designed for the needs and career stage of early-career postdoctoral researchers. A PN should not become a one-size-fits-all curriculum with excessive training obligations, rigid secondments, or consortium-driven structures that dilute the fellow's scientific autonomy and reduce research time. Training should support scientific excellence, progressive autonomy, leadership and career transition, while remaining flexible enough to reflect different disciplines, projects and career ambitions.

Training elements for PNs should/could include:

- **High-quality scientific training should remain the core of the programme.** Training should be designed around excellent research environments and the fellow's individual project. It should help fellows build project ownership, scientific judgement, leadership capacity and a clearer career direction, both academic and non-academic.
- **Modular and adaptable training.** Fellows should benefit from a strong common scientific and professional development core, but they should also be able to choose complementary modules depending on their career objectives. These could include grant writing, scientific leadership, supervision, lab or project management, grant preparation, interview or mock panel training, innovation and valorisation, intellectual property, entrepreneurship, collaboration with industry and non-academic sectors, science policy, research management, communication, and societal impact.
- **Peer-learning and mentorship-based approaches**. Workshops, retreats, and joint training schools could combine one-to-one mentoring with cohort-based interactions, allowing experienced postdoctoral researchers and supervisors to share practical insights on collaboration building, funding acquisition, research leadership or career development among others.

Structured peer-learning activities could also provide important value by creating spaces for fellows to exchange experience on research design, negative results, scientific communication, collaboration-building, funding acquisition, research leadership, innovation and technology transfer, open science, research integrity or career development. Fostering peer interaction and collective problem-solving could therefore improve both training quality and researcher wellbeing. Access to an independent career mentor could also be valuable, provided that this complements rather than replaces the central scientific supervision and integration in the host research environment. This mentoring structure would support both scientific development and broader career planning, while helping fellows progressively define their future path.

- **Practical interdisciplinary training.** PNs could train fellows in how to work as interdisciplinary researchers, not only frame projects as interdisciplinary. This could involve structured collaboration across disciplines, joint problem framing and co-creation of solutions within the cohort. This would equip fellows with practical skills for interdisciplinary research rather than treating interdisciplinarity as an abstract goal.
- **Flexible and meaningful intersectoral exposure.** Intersectoral exposure can be valuable, but should be tailored to the fellow's project and career plan rather than imposed through rigid or overly predefined secondments. Short, targeted interactions with relevant partners may often be more useful than long placements where these do not naturally fit the project or network.

However, many of these components could also be delivered through strengthened IFs, without necessarily creating a new PN scheme, preserving greater flexibility and scientific autonomy while still promoting high-quality mentoring and collaborative interactions.

MSCA Individual Fellowship (MSCA IF)

- What are your views on the possible introduction of grant portability in MSCA Individual Fellowships?

Grant portability in MSCA Individual Fellowships (IFs) is an interesting proposal, but it would require careful design and clear implementation rules. In principle, portability could strengthen researcher autonomy, career flexibility and continuity by allowing fellows to move to the environment that best supports their development. However, portability would also bring significant challenges, particularly because MSCA fellowships are strongly built around the match between the fellow, the project, the supervisor and the host environment. If introduced, portability should therefore be implemented through a carefully regulated mechanism, with clear scientific justification, strong safeguards to avoid concentrating opportunities around a small number of supervisors and institutions, and a robust framework preserving project feasibility, training quality and institutional responsibilities. Cases of supervisor misconduct, or situations where the original host environment changes unfavourably for the researcher, would be the most relevant circumstances in which grant portability should be applied. Aside from these cases, there are several issues that would need to be carefully considered before introducing grant portability in MSCA IFs:

- **Preserving the specific nature of MSCA IFs.** MSCA Individual Fellowships differ from more independent grant schemes, such as ERC grants, because they are built around a close relationship

between the fellow, the supervisor, the host institution and the training environment. The quality of the host, the supervision arrangements, the scientific environment, the infrastructure available, and the expected two-way transfer of knowledge are all central elements of the proposal and its evaluation. Portability could therefore be difficult to reconcile with the current logic of the scheme if a move disrupts the original training rationale, the knowledge-exchange objectives or the fellow's integration into the host environment. This is for example very relevant in experimental sciences, where project feasibility often depends strongly on the host laboratory, research infrastructure, technical platforms, team expertise and scientific context.

- **Ensuring coherence between the evaluated proposal and the implemented project.** A major concern is that portability could create inconsistencies between the conditions under which the proposal was evaluated and those under which the project is ultimately implemented. In the current model, successful proposals are assessed not only on the excellence of the fellow and the project, but also on the quality of the match between the fellow, the supervisor and the host institution. If the grant is transferred to another institution after the award, this match may no longer correspond to what was evaluated. This raises questions about whether the new host institution and supervisor would need to be re-assessed, how this would be done, and by whom. If portability were introduced more broadly, evaluation criteria may need to be revised to clarify the relative weight given to the fellow's merits, project quality, career-development plan, the quality of the initial host environment, and the possibility that the host environment may change during implementation.
- **Avoiding instability and unintended effects on host commitment.** MSCA IFs are relatively short compared with larger, longer-term grants. Excessive flexibility could introduce instability into a limited fellowship period, disrupting research progress, training continuity, integration within the host environment and the fellow's relationship with the supervisory team. It could also affect how fellows are integrated and supported within host institutions if they are perceived as potentially short-term members of the research environment. Host institutions and supervisors commit significant resources when supporting an MSCA IF application, including supervision, laboratory space, infrastructure, administrative support and integration into a research group. In some research fields, projects are embedded in team-based laboratory environments rather than being fully independent projects owned by an individual postdoctoral researcher. If portability is not carefully regulated, it could create uncertainty for host institutions and research groups, and may make some supervisors or institutions more hesitant to support applications. Clear safeguards would also be needed to ensure that transfers are driven by strong scientific, professional or career-development reasons, rather than by short-term considerations or moves unrelated to the objectives of the fellowship.
- **Avoiding inequalities between institutions and countries, while recognising the potential relevance in the second-phase of the model.** Portability could unintentionally reinforce existing imbalances in the European research landscape if stronger or better-resourced institutions are able to attract fellows after the award, while less-resourced or less-established institutions invest time and support in the application phase but then lose fellows to more prestigious environments. This risk may be particularly acute if portability is linked to a second phase requiring co-funding, as institutions or countries with greater structural funding capacity would be better positioned to retain or attract fellows. At the same time, some form of later-stage portability could be useful in specific cases, particularly where it supports career continuity if the original host cannot retain the

fellow or cannot provide suitable conditions for the next phase. A carefully designed second-phase model could also reduce pressure on initial host institutions that are unable to offer longer-term prospects, potentially broadening participation, provided that it does not shift the benefits disproportionately towards already well-resourced hosts. If such a model is considered, it should be designed carefully so that it supports researcher development without favouring institutions with greater co-funding capacity.

- **Defining clear procedures, responsibilities and eligibility conditions.** Moving a fellowship between institutions, and especially between countries, may involve significant legal, administrative and financial complexity. Issues may arise around employment contracts, salary conditions, social security, taxation, visas, financial management, institutional reporting, budget transfers, IP ownership, data management, ethics approvals, and access to infrastructure. If portability is introduced, the respective responsibilities of the original host, the receiving host, the supervisor and the fellow would need to be clearly defined. Grant portability would likely require formal grant agreement amendments to clarify these aspects. Any transfer request should be assessed case by case and should include a clear justification from the fellow, confirmation from the receiving host, an updated research and career-development plan, and evidence that the receiving host can provide appropriate supervision, infrastructure, training, career support and administrative capacity. Where appropriate, transfers should require agreement from both the original and receiving host institutions, while ensuring that this does not prevent fellows from moving in cases involving misconduct, conflict or serious deterioration of the host environment. Portability should also be monitored carefully to assess its effects on fellows, host institutions, project continuity and institutional balance across the programme.
- **Limiting timing, frequency and scope.** Allowing portability at any point without restriction could be problematic. Instead, a fixed initial period at the original host institution could help preserve project stability, training continuity and the integrity of the original evaluation. For example, portability within the first months, or potentially within the first year, should be discouraged or prohibited except in exceptional circumstances, such as misconduct or major changes in the host environment. There should also be sufficient time remaining in the fellowship for the transfer to be meaningful, and the number of transfers should be limited to avoid fragmentation. A phased or limited model may therefore be more appropriate than full portability from the start of the fellowship, with transfers considered only where they clearly preserve or strengthen the scientific quality, feasibility, training value and career-development objectives of the fellowship.

In this sense, portability should not become a general flexibility mechanism, but rather an exceptional and well-regulated option for clearly justified cases.

- What are your views on the two phases model proposed for individual fellowships in FP10? What advantages would you identify with such model? Should the scheme prioritise 3 years fully funded fellowships as the core model, or does the second phase provide meaningful additional benefits in terms of career transition and perspectives, institutional engagement and long-term impact?

The proposed extension of MSCA IFs to a three-year fully funded model would be a very positive development and should remain the core of the scheme. A 36-month fellowship would be a significant improvement compared with shorter formats, particularly in experimental research fields, where sufficient time is needed to develop an ambitious project, generate robust results, complete meaningful training, and prepare the next career step. A fully funded three-year model would provide more stability for fellows, support high-quality research and training, and strengthen researcher independence.

The proposed second phase could provide additional value, but only if its objectives, implementation and funding conditions are clearly defined. It should not become the central element of the scheme, nor an implicit expectation for all fellows or host institutions. Rather, it should remain optional and be activated only where it provides clear added value for the fellow's career transition and where the host, or another receiving organisation, can realistically support it. If well designed, Phase 2 could help fellows consolidate independence, further develop or exploit project results, prepare for future funding, such as ERC Starting Grants or national career-development schemes, develop translational, innovation or non-academic activities, or transition towards a more independent academic or non-academic position. However, if poorly designed, it could introduce uncertainty, inequalities and administrative complexity, and risk prolonging postdoctoral periods without improving career perspectives.

The **proposed two phases model raises several concerns** that would need to be addressed:

- **The purpose of Phase 2 needs to be much clearer.** Several aspects of the two-phase architecture remain conceptually unclear. Research training, scientific independence and career integration usually develop progressively and simultaneously during the postdoctoral stage, rather than as clearly separated phases. It is therefore important to define what Phase 2 is intended to achieve, how it differs from Phase 1, and how it complements other European or national instruments.
- **Phase 2 should not prolong the postdoctoral period without a real career transition.** A full five-year model could be problematic if it extends the postdoctoral period without providing a clear transition towards independence or a sustainable career path. A model that encourages fellows to remain for five years within the same postdoctoral framework could delay rather than accelerate career progression, especially if Phase 2 does not include clear milestones, independence-building measures or transition outcomes.
- **Co-funding could create inequalities between fellows, institutions and countries.** If Phase 2 depends on substantial institutional co-funding, participation may become concentrated in better-resourced institutions and countries. Hosts with stronger internal resources may be able to offer attractive Phase 2 conditions, while excellent institutions with less flexible funding may be unable to participate. This could reduce equal access across Europe, widen existing gaps between research systems, and create uneven career outcomes for fellows. It may also create uncertainty if access to

Phase 2 depends less on the quality of the fellow's career plan than on the financial capacity of the host institution.

- **Salary continuity, employment conditions and institutional career rules must be carefully addressed.** If Phase 1 follows MSCA remuneration levels but Phase 2 depends on national or institutional salary scales, fellows could face salary reductions in some countries as some institutions would not be able to maintain the same salary conditions without additional funding. This would undermine the attractiveness, fairness and sustainability of the model. Longer employment periods may also create legal or contractual implications in some national systems, including expectations of longer-term or permanent employment. The model should therefore avoid creating implicit obligations for institutions to retain fellows for five years where this is not compatible with national law, institutional career rules or open recruitment principles.
- **Phase 2 should not increase dependence on supervisors' or host institutions' resources.** If supervisors or host institutions are expected to cover a substantial part of the salary or project costs, fellows may become more dependent on the supervisor's resources or on the financial capacity of a specific host. This could reduce researcher autonomy and independence, which would be contrary to the objectives of the scheme. The funding model should therefore avoid creating unequal power dynamics or making access to Phase 2 dependent on individual supervisors' budgets.
- **The evaluation and transition between phases need to be coherent.** If only Phase 1 is evaluated, there may be a disconnect between what is assessed at proposal stage and what the fellowship is expected to deliver in terms of long-term career transition and impact. Applicants may have limited incentive to develop a robust Phase 2 plan if it is optional and not assessed, while institutions may be uncertain about the level of commitment expected from them. If Phase 2 is expected to contribute meaningfully to career progression and long-term impact, the conditions for accessing it, the responsibilities of the host, and the expected benefits for the fellow should be clearly defined. A transition assessment before entering Phase 2 could be introduced to confirm that continuation is justified, feasible and aligned with the fellow's career-development plan
- **The model could increase administrative, legal and financial complexity.** A two-phase structure may require additional agreements, budget planning, contract extensions, monitoring, reporting and evaluation of the transition between phases. These challenges would be greater if Phase 2 has different funding rules from Phase 1 or involves transfer to another host. The scheme should avoid undermining one of the current strengths of MSCA fellowships: their relative clarity and simplicity.
- **The proposed two-year post-PhD eligibility gap should be carefully reconsidered in MSCA IFs.** Although not strictly concerning Phase 2, excluding researchers from IFs funding during the first two years after the PhD could bring negative consequences. A strict time-based threshold may not adequately reflect researcher maturity, autonomy, project ownership or career trajectory, especially across different disciplines or non-linear careers. If the intention is to distinguish IFs from PNs, this should be done without creating unnecessary gaps in access to funding.

Potential advantages of the two-phase model include:

- **Supporting career transition, continuity and long-term impact.** A second phase could provide a useful bridge between a postdoctoral fellowship and the next career step, particularly if it helps fellows consolidate scientific independence, develop a more competitive profile for future funding, prepare future applications (e.g. ERC, national schemes), or move towards academic or non-

academic roles. It could also allow fellows to further develop promising results emerging from the first phase, mature scientific outputs, strengthen collaborations, support exploitation or translate research results into broader academic, technological or societal value. In this sense, Phase 2 could be valuable if it is framed as a genuine career-transition mechanism that builds on the scientific and training achievements of the first phase, rather than simply as an extension of the postdoctoral period.

- **Encouraging strategic institutional engagement.** Phase 2 could incentivise host organisations to think more strategically about postdoctoral career progression and talent development. Fellows often bring unique expertise to the host institution and, over the course of the fellowship, may become key experts in a specific method, technology or research area. Where there is a clear mutual benefit, a second phase could support longer-term institutional engagement and help organisations retain or further develop highly trained researchers.
- **Ensuring flexibility across career pathways and institutional contexts, with clear safeguards.** To deliver these benefits, Phase 2 should be flexible enough to reflect different career pathways and institutional contexts, but this flexibility would need to be carefully regulated. It should not be limited to retention at the original host institution, since this may not always be the best option for the fellow or feasible for the host. Depending on the fellow's career plan, Phase 2 could support continuation at the original host, transfer to another academic institution, movement to a non-academic environment, development of innovation or translational activities, industry collaboration, or preparation for independent funding elsewhere. However, where Phase 2 involves a change of host or sector, clear rules would be needed on supervision, funding responsibilities, project continuity, IP, data management and institutional commitments.

- What should be the incentives for organisations to participate in the second phase if it is voluntary?

If a voluntary second phase is introduced, incentives could help encourage organisations to participate, but they should be understood broadly and would need further discussion to avoid unintended consequences. Phase 2 should support the fellow's career transition and should not distort the primary mission of MSCA IFs of supporting excellence-driven research. Phase 2 should remain genuinely voluntary, flexible, administratively manageable and accessible to organisations with different levels of resources and national contexts. Thus, if introduced, the scheme should avoid creating unnecessary uncertainty for fellows, unrealistic commitments for host organisations, or incentives that widen inequalities between institutions and countries.

Possible incentives or enabling conditions could include:

- **Adequate EU co-funding.** An adequate level of EU contribution would be the most important incentive. A 50% contribution could be helpful, but may not be sufficient in all national and institutional contexts, particularly if organisations are expected to maintain MSCA-level remuneration or provide substantial mentoring, career-development and research support.
- **Flexibility in how Phase 2 can be used.** Organisations may be more willing to participate if Phase 2 can be adapted to different career pathways and institutional contexts. It could support consolidation of an academic profile, preparation for independent funding, translational or

innovation activities, industry collaboration, or transition to another academic or non-academic environment.

- **Recognition of institutional contribution.** Participation could also be encouraged through recognition of organisations that provide high-quality career-transition support, for example through visibility measures, excellence labels, or acknowledgement of their contribution to improving research career development.
- **Adequate institutional support costs.** If organisations are expected to provide supervision, infrastructure access, innovation support, IP advice, career-development services, research management and administrative support during Phase 2, a funding model that recognises these responsibilities could be an incentive.
- **Scientific or strategic added value.** Organisations may be more willing to participate where Phase 2 provides clear added value for the research environment, for example by consolidating expertise, methods or collaborations developed during the first phase. However, this will depend on institutional capacity and should not be assumed to apply equally across all organisations.

Articulation MSCA PN/IF

- What are your views on the proposed articulation between Postdoctoral Networks (PN) and Individual Fellowships (IF) in terms of supporting a clear progression logic across postdoctoral career stages, while respecting researchers' autonomy and accommodating disciplinary diversity?

The articulation between Postdoctoral Networks and Individual Fellowships should be refined to avoid imposing a rigid or linear postdoctoral career pathway that does not address the research talent realities overall. PN and IF must be articulated as complementary options within a flexible postdoctoral funding landscape. They should not be a mandatory sequence. Access to IF must not be delayed through an artificial time-based threshold that imposes a uniform progression logic across disciplines and career paths.

Several issues would need to be carefully considered:

- **PN and IF should remain complementary and parallel, not sequential.** A clearer distinction between PN and IF may be useful if it clarifies the purpose of each action. PN could support postdoctoral researchers through structured training, supervision, peer learning, collaborative research and network-level exposure. IF, in turn, should remain available for researchers ready to develop an individual project with a higher degree of autonomy, in any research field and not only in areas identified by PN networks. Recent PhD graduates should be able to choose between PN and IF depending on their profile, project, disciplinary context and career-development needs. On the contrary, making IF accessible only after two years post-PhD could create unnecessary gaps in access to individual funding and reduce opportunities for excellent early-career researchers already prepared to develop an independent, bottom-up project. Eligibility should therefore take into account researcher maturity, autonomy, project ownership and career-development needs, rather than relying only on time since PhD.
- **IF should remain essential for scientific autonomy and excellence-driven bottom-up research trajectories.** Individual Fellowships should continue to play a central role in fostering scientific

autonomy, independent research profiles and excellence-driven bottom-up research from early career stages onward. While PN may support projects framed around broader network objectives, this should not replace access to IFs for researchers whose development would be better supported through their own project. Applying for and implementing an individual project can itself be an important training step, helping researchers build autonomy and prepare for future funding opportunities.

- **The model should avoid delaying scientific autonomy.** A structured PN environment may be valuable for some postdoctoral researchers, particularly where collaborative training, interdisciplinarity, mentoring and cohort-based development are beneficial. However, if PN becomes the expected entry point before IF, it could extend the time researchers spend in a structured training environment and delay the transition towards individual scientific autonomy. It could also mean that researchers' future career development depends first on successfully accessing a PN, rather than being assessed directly through an IF proposal that reflects the quality of the fellow and of the individual project in any research field, together with the host environment, supervision arrangements and career-development plan. The articulation should therefore support progression where useful, without making progression dependent on passing through a predefined institutional or network-based stage.
- **The articulation should be monitored during implementation.** Given that the proposed PN/IF architecture would represent a significant change to postdoctoral funding, its effects should be monitored carefully. Feedback from fellows, supervisors and host institutions would be important to assess whether the model genuinely supports career progression, researcher autonomy, disciplinary diversity and successful transitions between postdoctoral career stages.

- To what extent do the proposed differentiation mechanisms (e.g. structural design, eligibility or recruitment criteria) help clarify the respective target groups of PN and IF, guide applicants towards the most suitable scheme for them, and contribute to managing oversubscription? What adjustments, if any, would you recommend to strengthen the complementarity between the two actions and avoid unintended competition or exclusion effects?

The proposed differentiation between Postdoctoral Networks and Individual Fellowships could help clarify the respective target groups of the two actions, but only if the distinction is based primarily on the purpose, design and expected outcomes of each scheme rather than on rigid eligibility cut-offs. PN and IF should remain complementary options within a flexible postdoctoral funding landscape. Differentiation should help applicants identify the most suitable instrument for their career stage, project and training needs, but should not be used mainly to manage oversubscription or create artificial exclusion effects.

Several issues would need to be considered:

- **Differentiation by scheme design is more meaningful than differentiation by time since PhD.** A clearer distinction between PN and IF may be useful if it reflects the different objectives of the two actions. PN could be positioned as a structured, cohort-based, network-oriented and training-focused scheme, supporting postdoctoral researchers through supervision, mentoring, peer

learning, collaborative research, intersectoral exposure and integration into broader research ecosystems. IF, in turn, should remain focused on the fellow, an individual research project in any field, a suitable host environment, supervision and a career-development plan, with greater emphasis on autonomy, project ownership and consolidation of independence. This distinction would be clearer and more useful than relying mainly on years since PhD.

- **Eligibility criteria should clarify target groups without creating exclusion effects or unfair competition.** A minimum two-year post-PhD threshold for IF may help separate PN and IF on paper, but it risks excluding excellent early-career researchers who are already ready to develop an individual project shortly after the PhD. Time since PhD is not always a reliable proxy for independence, maturity or project ownership, particularly across disciplines, career breaks and non-linear trajectories. At the same time, if IF has no upper limit or clear career-stage framing, it may increase competition between researchers at very different levels of experience and scientific maturity, making it harder for less-experienced postdoctoral researchers to succeed.
- **Oversubscription should not be addressed mainly through artificial exclusion.** Differentiation may help guide some applicants towards the most suitable scheme, but it will not solve oversubscription if the overall budget is not sufficient. Restricting access to IF for certain groups may simply shift pressure towards PN or other schemes, rather than reducing demand. PN should not become a substitute for IF simply because IF is oversubscribed, and IF should not absorb researchers who would benefit more from structured postdoctoral training. Both actions therefore need adequate budgets and clear identities. The objective should be better fit between applicant and instrument, not simply reducing application numbers through exclusion.
- **Clear identities and guidance will be needed to avoid confusion and unintended competition between PN and IF.** PN and IF would operate through different logics: PN applications are led by host institutions or networks, with fellows recruited later by participating organisations, while IF applications are built around the fellow, research project, host environment and supervision arrangements. This may affect applicant behaviour: some candidates may apply to both actions if eligible, while others may perceive PN as a more predictable route because recruitment is managed by participating institutions. Clear descriptions of the purpose, target profiles, expected outcomes and typical use cases of each action should be provided. Examples, decision tools or self-assessment guidance could help applicants and host institutions identify which scheme best fits the fellow's career stage, autonomy, project ownership, training needs and disciplinary context. Guidance should also explain how career breaks and non-linear trajectories are treated.
- **Evaluation criteria should reinforce the distinct purpose of each action.** PN and IF should be assessed according to their different objectives, rather than differentiated mainly through eligibility rules. PN evaluation should focus on the quality of the shared challenge, host and network environments, and capacity to support fellows' development, while IF evaluation should focus on the fellow, the individual project, host environment, supervision, career-development plan and readiness for autonomy.

The effects of the PN/IF differentiation should be monitored during implementation, using feedback from fellows, supervisors, host institutions and networks to assess whether the model is clarifying target groups, improving applicant fit, supporting career progression and avoiding unintended competition, exclusion effects or unequal access.

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