

“MSCA - Individual Fellowships” Proposal Preparation & Writing “Hints-&-Tips” The...Evaluator’s “Point of View”

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► **Participation in the MSCA evaluation panel**

2008 - 2012 (5 years)

► **Acting as Vice Chair of the ENV panel**

2013 - today (4 years, 2017)



European Fellowships

- Open to researchers either coming to Europe or moving within Europe.
- Can help to restart research careers after a break.
- Can also help reintegrate researchers coming back to Europe.

Global Fellowships

- Fund secondments outside Europe for researchers based in the EU or associated countries.
- There is a mandatory one-year return period.
- European and Global Fellowships can also include a **secondment period** of up to 3 or 6 months in another organisation in Europe, where this would boost the impact of the fellowship.

Who can apply?

This action is meant to support the **best, most promising individual researchers** from anywhere in the world.

Only **experienced researchers** can apply.

- This means you will have your doctoral degree or at least four years' full-time research experience by the time of the call deadline.

What does the funding cover?

The grant provides an **allowance to cover your living, travel and family costs.**

The grant is awarded to your host organisation, usually a university, research centre or a company in Europe.

The research costs and overheads of the host organisation(s) are also supported.

European Fellowships last from **one to two years**, Global Fellowships from **two to three** years.



Evaluation


- Proposals are evaluated by **independent experts**.
- Any natural person can register in the evaluator database and be selected to evaluate proposals within their field of expertise.
- When choosing evaluators for a Call, the European Commission puts special emphasis on **gender balance** and a fair representation of experts **from all relevant fields and sectors**.



Three evaluators draft individual evaluation reports for each proposal.

A consensus report, the so-called Evaluation Summary Report (**ESR**), establishes the proposal's final grade (**rapporteur**).

Proposals are then ranked according to their grade. Funding will be provided to eligible projects in descending ranking order according to the available budget for each panel.



General lesson 1: It is very important to elaborate on each point of the evaluation criteria (I put headings...)

Evaluation reports follow the same template. It is therefore essential to address each specific criterion as defined in the Call.

The evaluator will spot the weak points of the proposal and those that the applicant has deliberately or inadvertently omitted.

Evaluators will give high marks to proposals which are complete, coherent and detailed.



General lesson 2: Strengths / weaknesses

- Each evaluation report highlights both strengths and weaknesses.
- The strengths of the proposal will be identified and commented even though the overall proposal is deemed insufficient.
- Negative (and positive) things evaluators had to say (non-funded projects): A project scored 3 out of 5 in the Excellence criterion because **the originality of the research was not justified in sufficient detail**, even though **the aim of the proposal was timely** and **the state of the art was well presented**.



General lesson 3: Perfection is achievable

No weaknesses were identified !

This is an excellent research proposal !

This is an **outstanding proposal**, very well written and very clearly aligned with ... !

Score: 5





Excellence



Research quality is the basis of excellence

Research quality + Soundness of the Research objectives + Methodology and Approach to be used.

- Demonstrate the research methodology, making reference to encouraging preliminary results or synergies with other grants.
- Show **how** your project will use a cutting-edge approach, **how** it addresses a scientific challenge and **how** the research methodology is appropriate to address all of this.

- It is crucial to demonstrate the state of the art, and then discuss / present how the project relates to it.
- You must clearly demonstrate **the potential of the project to shift the knowledge frontier**.
- Even though the main objective of MSCA is to improve researchers' careers through mobility and individual fellowships... the evaluators are pleased when proposals **demonstrate the relevance of the projects to political, economic or societal problems, in the EU and beyond**.
- Ideally, projects should be **“timely and relevant”** not only to the scientific domain, but also to citizens at large.

Positive comments



“The proposed research is of **very high quality** utilising cutting-edge approaches.”

“The approach **is fully in line** with the objectives set.”

“The **research objectives** are clearly formulated and are adequately outlined against the state of the art.”

“There is a **synergy** with a recent ... Grant awarded to the host.”

“Encouraging **preliminary results** are shown.”

Negative comments



“The proposal is **vague** in terms of theories and scientific hypotheses.”

“The aims of the research project are described in **too generic terms**.”



Under **Quality** you might consider aspects such as:

- importance of the objectives
- timeliness
- novelty
- innovation in design/approach/methodology
- demonstrated awareness of the current state
- credibility
- ambition (too little, too much?)
- cross-disciplinarity

However, please be conscious at the same time, that excellent research does not need to score highly on every aspect.

For example, excellent projects do not necessarily have to be multidisciplinary or develop innovative methodologies provided that the high level objectives set can be realised by current approaches.





The second sub-criterion:
Clarity/TOK



- The **Supervision** sub-criterion is about the quality, efficacy and international interactions of the host laboratory and the **supervisory mechanisms** to be put in place.
- Finally, **Capacity** is principally about the candidate (CV rather than the 10 pages of the project).

Is it convincingly demonstrated that the candidate has the ability (as shown by performance, initiative, activities, awareness, collaborations etc.) to maximally benefit from the opportunities presented by the project, the host and the training programme devised?

- MSCA targets researchers **with a proven track record of high achievement relative to their career stage.**
- The proposal should reflect **what makes you an “excellent” researcher.**
- This is the moment to “**show off**” your accomplishments, experience, knowledge, skills, international impact.
- **Expertise, leadership and organisational skills** ... are very important.

- ▶ Evaluators not only look into the **track record of the researcher**, but in equal measure into the **track record, the research expertise and the international recognition and networks** of the **host institution**.
- ▶ Demonstrating the good quality of the host justifies the choice of this organisation over another. The good quality of the **scientific team** might be just as important as the profile of the **host** organisation itself.

One characteristic of excellent researchers is that they are prepared to work in new scientific environments in order to extend/improve their own knowledge.

Show that your research is **multi- or inter-disciplinary** and that you are ready **to learn from and share expertise with your host**.

Widening your academic and professional horizon is also an important step towards **professional maturity**.

Evaluators will assess your potential to “**reach professional maturity**”.

- Demonstrate that **you have the potential to enhance your knowledge through the project**.
- Your proposal must show that **the host will add value to your research**.
- On the other hand, your potential for professional maturity will also be evaluated by **how your project and expertise will affect the host organisation**.

Negative comments

“The proposal has not thoroughly indicated **how the proposed work would add further to the current level of professional maturity** of the researcher.”

“**Specific career goals are not clearly outlined** which question the potential to reach a position of professional maturity after the fellowship.”

“Although there is good potential for the candidate to acquire new knowledge and transferrable skills, the potential to specifically **acquire new research skills is not sufficiently demonstrated**. For example, the candidate is already familiar with some of the research techniques proposed in this project.”

Impact



- **It should have an impact on your career.** Enhancement of “research- and innovation-related human resources, skills, and working conditions” that should help you “realise [your] potential” and “provide [you] with new career perspectives”.
- **It should have an impact on the European society and economy:** People must be able to learn about its results, in a language understandable even to non-specialists. The proposal should therefore include a strategy on **communication** and **public engagement**, and refer to the **dissemination of research results**. Ideally, the project should help improve “European competitiveness” in a broad sense, by solving topical challenges or helping advance a technology with market potential.
- **It should “advance research”, “foster innovation” and “promote the research profession to the public”**

Be clear about the objectives of your research training

- Evaluators put great emphasis on the clarity with which the “research training objectives” are explained.
- Demonstrate good planning by specifying the objectives of your project in terms of research training, and connect these objectives to corresponding activities.
- Make your objectives credible and specific.

- The MSCA programme addresses research performed in both the **academic** and the **non-academic** sector.
- Where relevant, cooperation with the **private sector** can give the proposal an important edge/benefit.
- Involving industry in the project can help guide the research project onto a more meaningful path. Secondments to the non-academic or academic sector, respectively, are welcome but they need a **strong justification**.



Relationship with the scientist in charge

Ideally, MSCA fellows should not work as satellites, disconnected from everyday business of their host institution. But... they should be a valuable part of their new team. **Close interaction between researchers and their hosts' scientists strongly increases the chances of success.**



Make the mobility genuine

MSCA is above all a mobility programme. Even though researchers who have lived in their destination country for a maximum of 12 months prior to the call deadline are still eligible, there should be some argumentation **as to why a certain country or organisation has been chosen.**

Link the project to your future career

Illustrate the **boost** that your professional development will obtain from the grant, make reference to the networking opportunities that will lead to future collaborations, or the new skills and the more **interesting profile** that you will gain **because** of the project.

Justify your claims

Many evaluation reports comment the **vagueness** of some claims. Evaluators can spot inconsistencies, omissions or missing links between the suggested means and the targeted end.

Make sure to **justify your claims** and focus on specific, rather than generic, actions and skills.

Reach out (Outreach communication dissemination)

- Possible communication activities include **articles for the press, workshops and public lectures**, as well as academic and non-academic **publications**.
 - Possibilities are limitless and imagination can pay off – **smartphone apps, websites or webinars**, or any other medium or format, can help fulfil the requirement to communicate to the general public about your project results.
- the **public** – to both
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Implementation



- This section incorporates all the practical elements, work plans, milestones, contingencies, appropriate facilities, support systems, environment, collaborations etc. which will facilitate project success.
- A Gantt chart is recommended but this is not considered mandatory if the work plans describes the dynamics of the project convincingly.
- All sub-criteria in this part should be credible and feasible.
- Your ambitious project is put to the test of reality. Present a well-rounded and sound implementation plan.

In conclusion ...

- **Start thinking on the idea months before**
- **Start preparing the proposal at least 3 months before the deadline**
- **Read the guidelines – address each and every topic clearly**
- **Read the evaluation criteria and address clearly all of them**
- **Be coherent and consistent**
- **Provide as much quantified information as possible**



On Excellence

- A novel idea needs a perfectly prepared proposal.
- The research quality criterion is the most important one.
- Demonstrate how and why your project is original.
- Demonstrate your own expertise and the match between the host organisation's profile and your project.
- Stepping outside of borders brings genuine added value to the proposal: a project that bridges various disciplines, the academic and non-academic sector is appreciated.
- Finally, the fellowship should advance technical expertise, but also should help you acquire more complimentary skills.

On Impact

- Planning with the end in mind pays off: be explicit about the objectives of the project.
- One of these objectives is the advancement of your career.
- Another is the link to a wider – European agenda.
- Science should be accessible to a wider audience: the communication on your project's outcome to the general public is important.

On Implementation

- The implementation plan of the project should be realistic.

Intellectual Property management is another key aspect of the

- **The project should present a timeline, work packages, milestones and deliverables.**
- **Address potential risks that could affect the project and how you would deal with or minimise them.**

- Mention how, in practical terms, your host organisation provides support you will tap into its

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Ex-aequo proposals

Highly ranked proposals, which are likely to be funded and have absolutely the same scores for each criterion, are assessed more in depth by a specific panel

- Mobility of the candidate to the non-academic sector
- Mobility of the candidate from the non-academic sector
- Secondments
- Gender of the candidate (per panel according to predominance)
- Interdisciplinary and international cooperation

**For More
Information**

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THE EU FRAMEWORK PROGRAMME FOR RESEARCH AND INNOVATION

HORIZON 2020

HORIZON 2020

**Dream it !
Team it !
Make it happen !**

A valuable source:

How to write a Winning Proposal for IF

Evidence from Evaluation Summary
Reports

November 2014

Katharina Horst
Horizon 2020 National Contact Point
Luxembourg



Good Luck !