Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions in Horizon Europe
Feedback to the European Commission

EARMA Policy & Representation Committee
INTRODUCTION

EARMA, through its Policy & Representation Committee (PRC), has been invited to provide feedback on a set of recent proposals for the European Commission (EC) on changes to the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA). The PRC requested EARMA members to share their feedback on the current proposals and/or suggest other solutions to the issues at stake. We very much welcome the opportunity to provide this feedback, with a particular focus on the direct implementation impacts.

Within the Horizon Europe Framework, the MSCA remains a fully bottom-up programme and retains the same core objectives as it did in Horizon 2020, but aims to address these in a more flexible way. Specific considerations the EC has, deal with:

- Success rates
- Career perspective of post-doctoral researchers
- Career perspectives outside academia
- Citizen Involvement
- Synergies in Horizon Europe

In the next paragraphs, our input will be given to the aforementioned aspects.

SUCCESS RATES

The MSCA Doctoral Training Networks have a proven track record and clear European added value. The networks stimulate researchers to be mobile, enhance the training of researchers in general and PhD students in particular and are key for further realisation of the European Research Area. The first and foremost priority should therefore be to significantly increase the funding available for MSCA Doctoral Training Networks. However, the actual budget for MSCA under Horizon Europe appears to be lower than Horizon 2020. Thus, measures to reduce the number of submissions are being examined as a method to increase success rates. Whilst this is valid, the PRC does not feel that this will fully resolve the issue of oversubscription. It would appear that the MSCA may be a victim of its own success.

The two proposals, currently being discussed to increase success rates are:

1. Reduction of maximum fellow months
2. Restriction on resubmissions

1. Reduce maximum fellow months

To improve the success rates (currently around 7%) of the MSCA Doctoral Training Networks, the EC has proposed the reduction of the maximum fellows to 12 or 10 or 9. It is estimated that this has the potential to increase the success rate to around 11%.
We would be fully supportive of the proposal to reduce the number of fellows from 15 ESRs to 12 ESRs. This may aid in ensuring better coordination between the projects, a more thematic approach, increased participation and success rates. This would positively have the knock-on benefit of reducing the administrative complexity of running a MSCA Doctoral Training Network. However, it would be important to ensure adequate management budget. A reduction to less than 12 ESRs is not something we would support, since a smaller amount would restrict the positive effects of building a network. Another consequence of limiting the number of fellows would be, that the number of beneficiaries should be limited; again because of the goal of building a network. Having at least 2 ESRs at one beneficiary will add value to this goal.

2. Restrict resubmissions

Another consideration the EC has, is to restrict the resubmission of proposals. Currently around 50% of the applications are resubmissions, so eliminating could theoretically double the success rate.

If resubmissions of proposals were to be limited, either an “ERC like” model should be followed, whereby resubmissions are restricted for consortia/individuals that require significant revision with a cut-off for resubmission set at 85 – 90%. This would be feasible for mono-beneficiary grants, like MSCA Post-doctoral Fellowships. However, several practical concerns arise when attempting to limit resubmissions for multi-partner projects. Depending on the resubmission criteria, specific issues arise:

- If the resubmission criterion solely would take into account the composition of the consortium, for example X% same consortium partners, this will likely result in resubmissions in which partners have artificially been added and/or deleted in order to avoid being labelled as a resubmission. Such criteria might therefore be easily circumvented, resulting in limited effects on the success rate.
- If text recognition software was to be used, again this can easily be circumvented by artificially modifying the proposal. If such software is to be used, it should be focused on the research and excellence paragraphs in a proposal. Sections like impact and implementation are often based on previous experience and best practices and will therefore often be similar between proposals.

Overall, developing criteria for what constitutes a resubmission will likely lead to many discussions, discontent within the academic community and to rewarding those that are clever enough to work around these criteria. It would also be important to ensure, through monitoring, that so-called “new” proposals are not in fact resubmissions.

Whilst the volume of resubmissions can be a burden on REA and the evaluators as well as affecting success rates, the process of resubmission is vital for the less experienced scientific environments. Learning-by-doing and improving the proposal based on the Evaluation Summary Report helps to develop the required skills and knowledge to acquire external research funding, which in the end will also benefit young scientists in these environments. This must be taken into consideration for future design particularly for the EU13.

Given the learning-by-doing experience, another option is, to ask the same evaluators to review the resubmitted proposal. They can then judge the way the feedback was addressed.
and if the proposal as re-submitted improved and is now at a level of excellence, high enough to fund. Resubmissions should then be limited to one and it must be clear that it is resubmission.

Other suggestions
A number of suggestions to improve the success rates of the MSCA Doctoral Training Network are:

- To re-classify the Joint Doctorates programme within the ERASMUS programme;
- To reassess the Industry Doctorate programme to see if the impact could be achieved through a more focused scheme.
- Realise a cultural change through more support at the proposal stage to encourage higher quality proposals. The NCP network could be an instrument for this.
- 2-stage submission process
- Increase in scoring thresholds – these are quite low and there is a significant difference between those which score 70% and those which score 90%.

CAREER PERSPECTIVE OF POST-DOCTORAL RESEARCHERS

To discourage institutions from retaining post-doctoral researchers on a series of short-term contracts for long periods of time and to incentivise early career researchers to progress their careers into more senior academic positions on open contracts, the EC suggests to introduce the concept of ‘scientific age’ (the number of years spent as a researcher beyond obtaining a PhD). Postdoctoral Fellowships would then be restricted to those with a scientific age of less than 6 years.

The EC must be aware that introducing a ‘scientific age’ would imply a fundamental change of the focus of the MSCA programme and its objectives. Currently, the MSCA programme is designed to offer skills development at any career stage. Mobility of researchers can be a challenge, regardless of the career phase. Family attachments might be affecting and/or delaying the decision on when the time is right to go abroad and boost one’s career.

If the scientific age limit only takes into account the number of active years in research after obtaining the PhD degree, and hence does not take account of experience gained elsewhere (e.g. career breaks), then 6 years post-PhD seems a reasonable limitation. However, it is important to encourage “returning” researchers wishing to restart their research career. Although the vast majority of awardees are within the 6 year cohort, the impact of a small number of successful fellowships with those later in their career has also been seen. This impact has been directly related to two-way transfer of knowledge and the career development of the fellows who made significant disciplinary shifts in their research. In
addition, a scientific age limit under six years might be problematic for researchers from certain areas, such as medicine or the humanities.

Although it is worthy that the EC wants to discourage the negative behaviour of institutions regarding post-doctoral contracts, it is questionable whether introducing a scientific age will significantly contribute to this goal. As an example, Germany devised a law specifically for research, featuring a scientific age clause, which implies that hiring of researchers on fixed term contracts is limited to 6 years each pre- and post-doctoral. Furthermore, more than 80% of researchers in public institutions work on fixed term contracts, often with a duration of less than 12 moths. The consequence of both facts is, that highly trained researchers lose their position 6 years after their PhD, unless they make it either to one of the rare permanent positions or go abroad. Therefore, incentives should be placed on institutions instead of on the applicants. In the experience of many institutions, the MSCA IF have not been used for retaining post-doctoral researchers on a series of short-term contracts. On the contrary, significant numbers of MSCA fellows have advanced to academic/industry careers including through ERC attainment.

Other suggestions
A number of suggestions to improve the career perspective of the MSCA Post-doctoral Researchers are:

- To include the potential for a 6-month extension outside academia (intersectoral) – the focus here should be on impact and career development rather than restricted to the research.
- To consider the facilitation of returning and “new” fellows e.g. those undertaking disciplinary shifts in their research.
- More flexibility in the required content of the activity to be undertaken during the secondment may increase the feasibility and attractiveness for a significant number of fellows. One suggestion would be to allow late secondments (last 6 months of the fellowship period) for career development and impact purposes only i.e. without the requirement of part of the research work to be carried out while with the secondment partner.

CAREER PERSPECTIVES OUTSIDE ACADEMIA

To encourage researchers to consider a future career outside academia, an extension to the postdoctoral fellowship of 6 months is foreseen if a relevant secondment is conducted outside academia.

To encourage researchers to consider a future career outside academia, an extension of the fellowship outside academia constitutes the single most effective tool for pressuring
scientists to change their career to anything less precarious than academic research. So far, the big attraction of the MSCA programme is setting up a career as a research leader in any setting. However, if the EC wants to advocate researchers’ employment outside academia, an extension may be a good tool.

On the one hand, for exchanges to non-academic partners, 6 months might work better than a full year, since this would make it easier to work with secondments from the academic to the non-academic partner. This approach would also avoid the need for the non-academic partner to deal with the administrative burden of actually hiring the fellow for a certain period. On the other hand, a one-year extension would increase the impact of the fellowship on the candidate’s career and their prospects of employment both inside and outside academia.

The timing of the exposure during the fellowship for non-academic secondments and global fellowships should be thoroughly considered. If the exposure is at the end of the fellowship and does not focus on research-related elements of the project, this could facilitate the transition. If the secondment still focusses on research, then it could make the reintegration into the host institute less straightforward and could compromise the coherence of the project. In addition, it could also be seen that the host institution also benefits from the insights that the fellow has gained during his/her time in the academic sector.

Finally, it may be worthwhile to encourage institutions outside academia to host the postdoctoral fellowships.

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS INVOLVEMENT

*In our opinion, the Staff Exchange should be open for citizens’ involvement. One possibility to involve citizens in these actions would be to encourage Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) to participate. The involvement of CSOs as partners in RISE Actions could also ease the synergies with the Structural Funds, since many CSOs receive funding from the Structural Funds.*

One important issue that is considered to be related to the success of MSCA projects is the involvement of non-academic partners. Engaging non-academic partners in academic research inevitably presents challenges, typically relating to alignment of strategic and operational priorities, and beneficiaries often step-back at the proposal preparation phase. Therefore, they ought to be specifically encouraged to participate through the development of targeted incentives, for example, reduced taxes, extra months for fellows hosted by them, or awards for participating.

The secondments of administrative staff should be more flexible and not so strictly linked to research activities. Administrative staff often have the potential to engage citizens by
working with them directly (for example through outreach activities and secondments to press organisations or other initiatives such as the MY SCIENCE project).

Synergies with the Structural Funds are often challenging, both because of alignment of content and constraints related to timing. Synergies are more likely to emerge in consecutive projects, e.g. first a MSCA project, than a more local project with Structural Funds, implementing the results. This would require that the operational programmes on regional level would foresee such a mechanism.

**SYNERGIES IN HORIZON EUROPE**

‘Synergies in HE’ builds on the COFUND scheme, with a particular emphasis on strategic alignment with other sources of funding, including structural funds. There is a proposal to standardise on 70% contribution and to create more opportunities for newcomers by insisting on sustainability plans as part of applications.

We greatly welcome the proposal to standardise the 70% contribution which would definitely create more opportunities for newcomers. However, it is not clear how insisting on sustainability plans would make an impact for newcomers – it may have the opposite effect and create barriers for those who have not engaged before.

With regard to the strategic alignment with other sources, a stronger link with education policies and structural funds would be welcome. Of particular importance would be the internal synergies with the global challenges whereby COFUND programmes could be linked more directly with collaborative research in key challenge areas – a shortcoming of Horizon2020. This would enable Horizon Europe to deliver solutions to global challenges with an accompanying cohort of skilled researchers directly related to and trained in the area.

Suggestions in general:

- In both ITN and RISE schemes we have noticed that there are a couple of procedures which are not defined at the proposal stage but always intervene in case the proposal is granted. This is the redistribution of part of each partner’s budget to the coordinator for the coordination’s burden (in ITN) and to a third country partner in case there is some in the project (in RISE). We would suggest to clarify/declare it already at the proposal stage so to have crystal clear the budget each partner can dispose already from that step.

- MSCA IF Seal of Excellence looks not really useful for having a fast access to further funding. We would suggest to develop further instruments and mechanisms at EU level for funding or facilitating it for proposals which get the seal.