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MSCA: Research Talent is Europe's Strategic Advantage

Europe is seeking to strengthen its competitiveness, technological leadership and strategic autonomy in an increasingly complex global environment. While much attention is rightly focused on technologies, industries and investment, Europe's long-term capacity to innovate ultimately depends on its ability to generate new knowledge and cultivate the research talent driving it.

Thirty years after its launch, the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) remains one of Europe's most effective instruments for building the research and innovation (R&I) talent by supporting generations of researchers, strengthening Europe's research institutions and contributing significantly to the advancement of knowledge across all scientific domains.

As negotiations advance on the next Horizon Europe - FP10 and Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), it is crucial to recognise and reinforce MSCA.

MSCA is, and must remain, a research programme

The reason for MSCA's success lies in its core purpose: boosting excellent research through investment in early and mid-career researchers.[1] MSCA is, first and foremost, a research programme. As the only European instrument dedicated to supporting researchers from doctoral candidates to emerging research leaders, it uniquely strengthens the talent pipeline on which Europe's research, innovation and competitiveness ambitions ultimately depend.

By remaining equally open to all research fields, MSCA has consistently demonstrated its ability to anticipate emerging needs and address evolving societal and geopolitical challenges precisely because it remains researcher-driven and responsive to new ideas. Its bottom-up, research-field agnostic approach enables Europe not only to respond to current challenges but also to anticipate those that are emerging – long before they are flagged at political level.

MSCA goes beyond being a mobility programme, as it provides researchers with the conditions to pursue ambitious research, build independence, and contribute to long-term R&I capacity[2]. Over the past thirty years, MSCA has laid the foundations of a European framework that enables researchers to build international networks and contribute to nurturing strong research environments across Europe.

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[1] European Commission, *Ex-post Evaluation of Horizon 2020, the EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation* COM(2024), p. 75, p. 80, available here. European Commission, *Evaluation study on Excellent Science in the European Framework Programmes for Research and Innovation*, Final Report Phase 2 – supporting the interim evaluation of Horizon Europe (2024), p. 12, available here.

[2] European Commission, *Excellent Science Evaluation Study*, Annex Phase 2 (2024), p. 320, available here.

This role is essential for Europe's ability to sustain a strong and competitive R&I talent base. Within a context of increasing global competition for researchers, Europe needs to be bold and clear about the opportunities it offers for excellent talent to build their careers in Europe.

The programme's impact extends well beyond individual researchers. Over three decades, MSCA has become a de facto "quality label"[3] that has influenced research cultures, strengthened research fields through doctoral education and postdoctoral careers, improved supervision practices, encouraged international and intersectoral collaboration, and supported institutions in creating more attractive research environments[4] that directly improve careers in research and innovation.

MSCA's value goes beyond immediate skills needs

Increasingly, European policy discussions are also focusing on skills shortages and labour market needs in strategic sectors. However relevant these needs may be, MSCA should not be intended as an instrument to address shortages and labour market demands. This is not what makes MSCA impactful. Its core mission is to ensure that Europe continues to generate excellent researchers and strengthen its long-term research capacity. Preserving MSCA's open, research-field agnostic and bottom-up nature is therefore essential to ensuring that Europe continues to boost talent and excellence wherever they emerge. By contrast, introducing top-down thematic priorities would limit its ability to generate unexpected breakthroughs and interdisciplinary knowledge in all research fields, including those that will be critical in future and are not yet recognised as such, i.e. it would reduce its impact on European resilience and competitiveness in the long run.

The continued and even increasing oversubscription of MSCA reflects the demand for this model. Nonetheless, too many excellent researchers and projects remain unfunded, representing lost potential for scientific discovery, international collaboration, institutional development, and Europe's future talent capacity. This is where European leaders should pay close attention. The urgency is not about changing the model, but to enhance its impact.

MSCA's strength lies in its long-term vision

At a time when calls for greater control and prescriptiveness for European funding are increasing, it is important to recognise that scientific breakthroughs rarely emerge from predetermined pathways.

Strategic, mission-oriented and targeted research instruments have an important place within the European R&I landscape. If there is a need to develop targeted research, training and mobility actions addressing predefined strategic priorities, these shall be pursued through dedicated instruments under Pillar II of FP10, or other programmes. This would allow Europe to strengthen its capacity to address strategic priorities without redefining MSCA. Europe does need instruments capable of responding to immediate priorities, but it also requires instruments capable of

[3] European Research Executive Agency, *The Added Value of MSCA Doctorates: A Mixed-Methods Study* (preprint, 2026) 8, available **here**.

[4] European Commission, *Ex-post Evaluation of Horizon 2020, the EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation* COM(2024) 49 final, p. 87, available **here**.

cultivating the knowledge, talent, and scientific capabilities from which future priorities emerge. One should not come at the sacrifice of the other.

MSCA has demonstrated for three decades that this investment works. Its future development should preserve the features that make it successful while enabling the programme to deliver with greater ambition. Maintaining MSCA within Pillar I as a fully bottom-up programme, open to all scientific domains, is essential to preserving its unique role, coherence and long-term impact. The added value of the programme lies in its forward-looking vision that invests in the research talent and knowledge on which Europe's long-term competitiveness depends.

The undersigned organisations have a clear message to all European leaders negotiating the next Horizon Europe: Do not change Europe's proven MSCA model, instead, scale it and multiply its impact.

Co-signed by:

allea All European Academies

AURORA

CESAER The strong and united voice of universities of science and technology in Europe

Universities Coimbra Group

EARMA European Association of Research Managers and Administrators

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eurodoc The European Council of Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers

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