



MSCA-NET

POLICY BRIEF: SYNERGIES

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Introduction

This policy brief aims to provide a short, but comprehensive overview of the synergistic approach to research and innovation funding supported by the European Commission. The brief aims to help researchers and organisations better understand the policy objectives in the context of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions.

The brief is not intended to duplicate or otherwise replace existing EU guidance and will bring the different information sources together and provide direct signposting to the most relevant resources.

Introduction to Synergies

Synergies between EU programmes, national and regional programmes for research and innovation will enable the Union to capitalize on the full potential of research and innovation investments. Research and Innovation is a key European policy to boost the Union's economic and competitiveness at a global scale, reinforce its scientific and technological base and promote innovation. Synergies and complementarities help to address global challenges, strengthen the Union's scientific excellence, create cross-border networks, reinforce human capital, and support the structure of national research and innovation systems. Strengthening synergies will also help to foster the European Research Area.

The Aim of Synergies



Synergies in Horizon Europe

The synergistic approach to leveraging funding and to optimize the added value of the budget of the Union is fully supported by the 2021-2027 Multi Annual Financial Framework (MFF). This provides a flexible and agile budgetary framework that supports and reinforces synergies between directly managed programmes, as well as with other Union programmes. The importance of developing and promoting synergies and complementarity is also firmly established in the Common Provisions Regulations as well as in the regulations establishing a range of EU programmes, such as LIFE, EU4Health, and Digital Europe.

Moreover, the 'Regulation establishing Horizon Europe', and the 'Specific Programme Implementing Horizon Europe' also directly support the development and promotion of synergies across Horizon Europe, including EU Missions, European Partnership, and co-funding schemes, with other Union programmes, such as European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Social Fund Plus. Synergies are also encouraged with regional and national research and innovation funding programmes to further rationalize the funding landscape and to fully capitalize on research and innovation investment. This includes the specific intervention for MSCA 'Improving and Facilitating

Synergies' which expand synergies beyond research and innovation to include training programmes and other research career development initiatives.

Specific Programme implementing Horizon Europe – “promote synergies between Horizon Europe and other Union programmes ... thereby becoming a point of reference for R&I in all related programmes across the Union budget and non-funding instruments.”

Throughout the development of Horizon Europe attention has been given to coordinate and develop complementarity between different Union policies, from their design and strategic planning through to project selection, management, communication, dissemination, exploitation, monitoring, auditing, and governance. The aim of the approach is to avoid duplication, increasing the leverage of Union funding and to decreasing the administrative burden for applicants and beneficiaries.

The support and promotion of synergies is also addressed in the Horizon Europe Strategic Plan 2021-2024. Specifically, the four key strategic orientations¹ outlined in the strategic plan set the foundations for building synergies and investments at Member State level. Moreover, the General Introduction to the Work Programme 2023-2024 sets the stage for fostering cooperation with EU funding programmes, including the deployment and uptake of research results and solutions. Individual 2023-2024 work programmes also include direct references to supporting and promoting synergies. This includes the MSCA Work Programme 2023-2024.

MSCA AND SYNERGIES IN HORIZON 2020

MSCA demonstrates an overall complementarity with EU programmes, in particular Erasmus+, ESIF (with a focus on research infrastructures), and with national programmes.

Approximately 3000 H2020 MSCA projects can be linked with other EU schemes.

Around 20% (7816) of all beneficiaries in H2020 participate in MSCA and around 16.5% (6,600) were linked with projects financed not through H2020.

Approximately 29% of MSCA projects are linked, based on matching beneficiaries, to other, non-H2020, EU initiatives.

Source: Evaluation study on the external coherence and synergies of Horizon 2020 within the European research and innovation support system

MSCA and Synergies with Union Programmes

The MSCA Work Programme 2023-2024 directly supports the creation of synergies and complementarities between the individual MSCA actions, other Union programs, and other parts of Horizon Europe such as the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT) and Widening Participation and Spreading Excellence

¹ The four key strategic orientations for the period 2021-2024 are Promoting an open strategic autonomy by leading the development of key digital, enabling and emerging technologies, sectors and value chains; Restoring Europe's ecosystems and biodiversity, and managing sustainably natural resources; Making Europe the first digitally enabled circular, climate-neutral and sustainable economy; and Creating a more resilient, inclusive and democratic European society.

https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/horizon_europe_strategic_plan_2021-2024.pdf

(WIDERA). It also promotes the development of links with cohesion policy funds and the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) through the COFUND action and the Seal of Excellence for mono-beneficiary calls. MSCA training programmes and research career development initiatives can be supported through complementary public or private funding sources at regional, national, or Union levels.

Synergies with Widening Participation and Spreading Excellence (WIDERA)

Both the MSCA and WIDERA work programmes 2023-2024 play a key role in helping to strengthen the European research Area. Calls under both programmes aim to support the free circulation of researchers, enhance cross-border collaboration, promote gender equality, and increase skills and career development. Applicants to both schemes can choose their area of research and individual research topics, offering opportunities to develop synergies between a wide number of MSCA and WIDERA calls. Specifically, building on the Widening Fellowships pilot introduced in 2018, the ERA Fellowships under WIDERA support excellent researchers of any nationality not funded through the MSCA to undertake an individual fellowship in a widening country. Applicants must submit their proposal to the MSCA Postdoctoral Fellowships with a host in an eligible Widening country. ERA Fellowships will be implemented using the award criteria, scoring and threshold for MSCA and will also follow the MSCA model grant agreement.

The ex-post analyses of Horizon 2020² highlight the key role that MSCA has in supporting talent circulation and counteracting brain drain. Over half of the incoming Individual Fellows to Romania, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Latvia, Slovakia, Cyprus, Croatia, Estonia, Poland, and Hungary, were returning to their country of origin. More than 25% of the postdoctoral researchers recruited through MSCA COFUND returned to a widening country.

Synergies with Research Infrastructures (RI)

MSCA actions can directly complement the aim of Research Infrastructures under Horizon Europe, which is to develop world-class sustainable research infrastructures, reduce the fragmentation of the research ecosystem, attract researchers from within and outside Europe, and support skills development. Involving research infrastructures in MSCA funded projects can help to increase the training opportunities and long-term career prospects of MSCA fellows. Participation in MSCA actions also allows European Research Infrastructures to provide high-quality training, career development and mobility to their researchers and staff.

Synergies with European Research Council (ERC)

There are opportunities for synergies and complementarities between MSCA and ERC as both schemes support excellent researchers and innovators throughout all stages of their career. The schemes also offer freedom to applicants to choose their research topic in any research and innovation discipline. Supported researchers from both schemes can use the different funding modalities offered by both MSCA and ERC to further develop their long-term career sustainability and overarching research aspirations.

Synergies with European Innovation Council (EIC)

The EIC sets out to identify and support breakthrough technologies and innovations in all research disciplines with the potential to scale up internationally and become market leaders. It supports all stages of innovation from research and development through to the development and scaling up of start-ups and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Researchers and innovators involved in MSCA funded projects could further develop the outcomes of their projects by utilizing EIC funding opportunities. In addition, MSCA fellows from Doctoral Networks, Postdoctoral Fellowships and COFUND will be eligible to participate in the “EIC The Next Generation Innovation Talents Internships”. This action will allow companies to host researchers and would-be innovators

MSCA and Research infrastructure

A Research infrastructure is included as a consortium partner for a Doctoral network or COFUND programme. The RI host secondments and develops other training opportunities for the recruited researchers.

A Research infrastructure sets up a COFUND programme to develop skills and expertise in their research area and develop new knowledge.

² <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/bbdfee66-149d-11ee-806b-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>; https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/knowledge-publications-tools-and-data/publications/all-publications/interim-evaluation-horizon-2020-key-documents_en

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through innovation internships. This allows both parties to benefit from each other's knowledge and experience as well as enhancing the future innovation potential within the EU.

Synergies with European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT)

MSCA and EIT

MSCA fellows participate in professional courses offered by the EIT through the beneficiary's involvement in a KIC. Organisations in a KIC apply for Staff Exchange funding to help develop and strengthen their existing network.

Dedicated guidance on **Synergies between the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions and the European Institute of Innovation and Technology** sets the scene and the legal bases for synergies and complementarities between the two schemes. Both schemes promote the development of entrepreneurial talent and innovation skills, encourage the transfer of knowledge between sectors, and support the integration of higher education, research, and businesses ('knowledge triangle') into innovation ecosystems. In addition to direct links between individual MSCA projects and the individual EIT Knowledge & Innovation Communities (KICs), complementarities exist between KICs' education programmes and activities, including courses, training schools and PhD programmes and MSCA actions such as Doctoral Networks, COFUND, Postdoctoral Fellowships, Staff Exchanges and MSCA and Citizens.

Synergies with EU Missions

Due to the bottom-up nature of the MSCA which allows topics to be chosen freely by the applicants, the programme funds numerous projects that directly contribute global challenges, to European policy areas including the EU Missions and European Partnerships. Moreover, the call for "Feedback to Policy Coordination and Support Action" in the MSCA Work Programme 2023-2024 facilitates stronger thematic links between MSCA projects. The call also sets out to support the exploitation and assessment of the impact of MSCA project results in relation to EU policy priority areas, including the EU Missions. In addition, in collaboration with the European Research Executive Agency, Directorate-General Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC) have run cluster events related to the EU missions, such as Cancer, the European Green Deal, and Oceans and Waters. More information on the EU missions in Horizon Europe and the links with MSCA can be found in the dedicated [MSCA-NET Missions Policy Brief](#).

Synergies with Erasmus

The dedicated guidance on **Synergies between the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions and Erasmus+ in the area of Higher Education** clearly indicates an overall complementarity between MSCA and Erasmus+. Both programmes propose mobility, training, and career development opportunities for students, staff, and researchers. They allow individuals to develop a comprehensive research and innovation skill set that will support their long-term employability. In addition to the European Universities Initiative, which is funded by both programmes, there are clear synergies between Doctoral Networks, Postdoctoral Fellowships, Staff Exchanges, COFUND, Erasmus+ Mobility for Higher Education Students and Staff, Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters Degrees, Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education, Erasmus+ Partnerships for Cooperation, and Erasmus+ Partnerships for Innovation. Organisations can apply to one or more of the actions to help meet strategic objectives, to support long term sustainability of collaborations and training programmes, to further the career development of staff and researchers, and to enhance the offering of the different projects.

MSCA and Erasmus+

An alliance of universities funded by the European Universities Initiative, apply for a COFUND Postdoctoral Fellowship programme. The COFUND includes all members of the alliances as well as external academic and non-academic sector partners bring added value to the alliance. One of the partners is part of an Erasmus Joint Masters degree, and the MSCA Doctoral Candidates give lectures and workshops to the masters students. Joint training on transferable skills is organised for both cohorts.

Synergies with Euratom

Under Horizon Europe, organisations active in nuclear research established in one of EU Member States or countries associated to the Euratom Research and Training programme 2021-2025 are eligible to participate in the MSCA Postdoctoral fellowship call. Fellowships in an area of research supported by Euratom will be directly supported by an indicative annual financial contribution of EUR 1 million to the MSCA Postdoctoral Fellowships call by the Euratom Research and Training Programme 2021-2025.

Synergies with the Science for Policy Initiative

Work is being undertaken to strengthen the links between MSCA and with the Joint Research Centre (JRC) on the topic of [Science for Policy by the JRC and Directorate-General Education, Youth, Sport and Culture \(DG EAC\)](#). The aim is to help bridge the gap between MSCA generated research results and uptake by policymakers. The JRC can take part in MSCA projects as an associated partner and MSCA Fellows can undergo secondments at the JRC.

DG EAC in collaboration with the JRC has hosted two science-policy matchmaking events to bring together researchers interested in or involved in MSCA funded projects and policy makers. The aim is to help identify secondment and placement opportunities.

Synergies with European Structural and Investment funds (ESIF)

The regulation establishing Horizon Europe allows for strengthened synergies between cohesion policy funds under shared management and funds under direct management. Mechanisms include the Seal of Excellence, funding transfer, and cumulative funding. Applicants who receive the seal may be eligible to apply to [Seal of Excellence Schemes](#) financed by ESIF funding if the project is aligned with the priorities of a Member State or a region's cohesion policy programme. **The Commission Notice on the synergies between European Research and Development Fund (ERDF) Programmes and Horizon Europe** provides the bases for synergies between ERDF and Horizon Europe including with MSCA.

MSCA and ERDF

A COFUND programme focuses on a specific research area aligned with the Research and Innovation Strategies for Smart Specialisation (RIS3 strategies) for their region, thereby helping to achieve the overall goals of the ERDF funds.

The MSCA Work Programme 2023-2024 explicitly promotes COFUND programmes based on national or regional Research and Innovation Strategies for Smart Specialization (RIS3 strategies). It also encourages and supports funding synergies with Cohesion policy funds and the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) through the flexible use of the COFUND Allowance.

The 5 European Structural and Investment Funds

- European regional development fund (ERDF)
- European social fund (ESF)
- Cohesion fund (CF)
- European agricultural fund for rural development (EAFRD)
- European maritime and fisheries fund (EMFF)

Synergies with the Seal of Excellence

The [Seal of Excellence](#) is a quality label awarded to project proposals submitted to Horizon Europe, including Postdoctoral fellowships and COFUND, who are evaluated at a specific threshold, but are unable to be funded due to budgetary constraints. The Seal of Excellence certifies that these proposals are excellent. The Seal of Excellence enable the leveraging of different institutional, regional, and national funding sources including Cohesion policy funds and the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF). Member states and regions are encouraged to establish funding programmes to support recipients of a Seal of Excellence. 22 schemes across 14 countries currently offer support at national/regional level for MSCA proposals with a Seal of Excellence.

Synergies with COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology)

COST supports the development of new and existing interdisciplinary and international research networks. The networks are open to all science and technology fields and support researchers and innovators at all career stages. As with MSCA, COST places a strong emphasis on inclusion and diversity, as well as mobility and skills development. Applicants to both COST and MSCA have freedom to develop their own research topic. Between 2014-2020, those who participated in COST had a 39% success rate when applying to H2020. The average success rate of H2020 was approximately 12%.

MSCA and COST

A MSCA Fellow joins the management structure of an existing COST action to gain leadership and management experience. An MSCA Fellow goes on a COST short term scientific missions and attends a COST training schools to complement their MSCA project. A consortium member of a Doctoral Network is involved in a COST action and organises a joint training summer school.

How MSCA projects can benefit from Synergies

MSCA applicants are strongly encouraged to think creatively about the other funding programmes they are involved in personally or at an institutional level, and that can be leveraged to bring added value to their MSCA proposals.

During project implementation MSCA fellows and beneficiaries should look to maximise the research, training, and networking opportunities available to them. For example, specific activities of the MSCA Action can be funded by alternative or complementary funding sources, provided that the same activities are not also funded by the MSCA Action (i.e. no 'double-funding').

When looking to long-term career development, the sustainability of networks, and the pursuit of long-term strategic objectives, MSCA funded staff, researchers and organisations should fully capitalise on the wide range of research and innovation investment at a regional, national, and international level. This includes fully utilising the research and innovation opportunities available through Horizon Europe and other Union programmes.

Benefits of Synergies to MSCA

Organisations

- Brings added value to existing networks
- Helps meet strategic objectives
- Helps attract world class international researchers and staff
- Enhances the impact of research
- Enhances international standing and reputation
- Leverages research and innovation funding
- Increases research and innovation capacity
- Supports the development develop of sustainable international partnerships
- Builds and enhances intersectoral relationships
- Supports innovative ways of cooperation and transfer of knowledge
- Increases exploitation and commercialisation of results

Researchers

- Enhances exposure to different sectors, organisations, and cultures
- Helps build new and existing partnership and collaborative networks
- Enhances knowledge base
- Helps develop transferable skills and competencies
- Increases employability and career prospects
- Develops creative, innovative, and entrepreneurial mind-sets
- Enhances networking and communication capacities
- Increases international exposure
- Increases impact and exploitation of results
- Develops links between research and innovation with policymaking
- Increases research excellence

References and Resources

- **Horizon Europe and MSCA**
 - [Regulation establishing Horizon Europe](#)
 - [Specific programme implementing Horizon Europe](#)
 - [Horizon Europe Strategic Plan 2021-2024](#)
 - [General Introduction to the Work Programme 2023-2024](#)
 - [MSCA Work Programme 2023-2024](#)

- **EU Research and Innovation Policy**
 - [Prague Declaration on Synergies in the Research and Innovation Funding in Europe Strategic Plan 2020-2024](#)
 - [Action Plan on Synergies between Civil, Defence, and Space Industries](#)
 - [Laying down common provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund Plus, the Cohesion Fund, the Just Transition Fund and the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund and financial rules for those and for the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Internal Security Fund and the Instrument for Financial Support for Border Management and Visa Policy](#)
 - [Council Recommendations on a Pact for Research and Innovation in Europe](#)
 - [The European Research Area \(ERA\)](#)

- **Synergies with MSCA**
 - [Synergies between MSCA and the European Institute of Innovation and Technology](#)
 - [Synergies between MSCA & Erasmus+ in the area of higher education](#)
 - [Commission Notice on the synergies between European Research and Development Fund \(ERDF\)](#)
 - [Evaluation study on the external coherence and synergies of Horizon 2020 within the European research and innovation support system](#)