



MSCA-NET

POLICY-BRIEF: SUPERVISION

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NETWORK OF THE MARIE SKŁODOWSKA-CURIE ACTIONS NATIONAL CONTACT POINTS

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Introduction

This policy brief aims to provide a short and comprehensive overview of the requirements relating to supervision in the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) and to help researchers and organisations better understand the policy objectives within the context of the MSCA.

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

Introduction to supervision

Supervision is a key element in the MSCA as it generates a research environment in which MSCA fellows can best further their careers. Fellows, supervisors, and institutions all have a role to play in ensuring that excellent supervision is practiced.

The legal framework concerning supervision is set in the Horizon Europe Grant Agreement. Specifically, beneficiaries will find the mandatory rules on supervision and mentoring within the MSCA in Annex 5 of the Model Grant Agreement.

Additionally, the European Charter for Researchers, to which the Grant Agreement refers, includes several obligations concerning supervision, both with regards to supervisors and supervised researchers themselves. Further relevant documents within the MSCA such as the MSCA Work Programme, the Guides for Applicants and the Proposal Template also contain sections on supervision. But how is supervision defined in the MSCA and what are supervisors' tasks?

Supervisors are required to have the time, experience, expertise, and commitment to appropriately support their MSCA fellows using the necessary progress and review procedures as well as providing them with the necessary feedback. In the Doctoral Networks (DN), Postdoctoral Fellowships (PF) and COFUND actions, doctoral and postdoctoral researchers are required to have (at least) one supervisor, usually a qualified researcher, at their destination host organisation(s) who will support them both with regards to research and professional matters in addition to enhancing their career perspectives.

In addition to creating added value for researchers, institutions also benefit from positive supervision. By implementing the MSCA supervision requirements, organisations can enhance the quality and sustainability of their supervision practices.

The supervision aspect is considered to be greatly important in the MSCA. This can be seen, for example, by the fact that MSCA fellows are required to carry out a survey providing feedback to the EC at the end of their fellowships and the two years after completion that includes topics such as supervision.

Political background

As part of the Bologna Process, the **Salzburg Principles** were introduced in 2005 to serve as a foundation for reforming the doctoral education. They emphasise that adequate supervision is crucial for the success of the doctoral education. The principles advocate the establishment of clear and transparent supervision agreements clearly outlining the rights and responsibilities of both doctoral candidates and their supervisors. High-quality supervision is also emphasised in the **Principles for Innovative Doctoral Training** calling for clear standards and responsibilities, effective guidance, support, and mentorship. The LERU position paper **Careers of researchers inside and outside academia** from 2018 emphasises the importance of effective supervision for both academic and non-academic career paths.

The **European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity**, also referred to in the Grant Agreement, addresses supervision as a critical component towards maintaining research integrity. Supervisors are supposed to train researchers in responsible research, provide the necessary resources required to carry out research, give feedback and promptly address any issues that arise. The importance of supervision was further demonstrated as part of the German EU Council Presidency in 2020, where it was the main topic of the **MSCA Presidency Conference**. The conference's outcomes were

incorporated into the **Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions Guidelines on Supervision** by the European Commission. These guidelines are non-binding, but MSCA projects are strongly encouraged to take them into consideration. In 2023, the Council of the European Union adopted the **Recommendation on a European framework to attract and retain research, innovation and entrepreneurial talents in Europe** that also include an updated **European Charter for Researchers**. Organisations participating in MSCA agree to abide by the principles of this charter. Pillar 4 of the revised Charter includes a section on “supervision and mentoring”, emphasising the responsibility of institutions and supervisors to provide clear and constructive feedback, ensure research integrity, and support the career development of researchers.

Requirements and recommendations

Supervision in the Grant Agreement

In the Horizon Europe Model Grant Agreement, supervision is mandatory in order to ensure that each researcher receives adequate guidance and mentorship. In Annex 5 of the Model Grant Agreement, Article 14 (Ethics) states:

In addition, the beneficiaries must respect the fundamental principle of research integrity — as set out in the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity. This implies compliance with the following principles: accountability for the research from idea to publication, for its management and organisation, for training, supervision and mentoring, and for its wider impacts.

This regulation applies to all beneficiaries participating in Horizon Europe. The special importance of supervision within the MSCA is emphasised by additional obligations for supervision contained in the Model Grant Agreement that beneficiaries must adhere to when implementing a PF, DN, or COFUND. Furthermore, SE beneficiaries must ensure that the seconded staff are adequately mentored.

Supervision in the MSCA Work Programme

The MSCA Work Programme emphasises that supervision is a key principle in the MSCA. Effective supervision fosters a supportive environment for researchers. MSCA beneficiaries must ensure adequate supervision, mentoring and career guidance in accordance with the European Charter for Researchers. Excellence in supervision is required and the quality of supervision is a key evaluation criterion for Postdoctoral Fellowships (PF), Doctoral Networks (DN), and COFUND proposals, as highlighted in the MSCA Work Programme:

The MSCA focus on excellence in various aspects: excellence does not only apply to the individual fellows supported or the collaborations fostered and knowledge transferred, but also to the R&I methodologies applied, the research conducted as well as the training, supervision and career guidance provided¹.

¹ MSCA Work Programme 2023-2025, p. 7

The Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions Guidelines on Supervision

The Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions Guidelines on Supervision outline a framework for effective supervision in MSCA projects. Published in 2021, the guidelines stress adaptable supervision tailored to discipline and experience and emphasise access to resources, skill development, and constructive feedback. Researchers must follow the European Charter for Researchers, manage progress, and maintain communication. Supervisors are expected to facilitate access to necessary research equipment, resources and relevant information. Additionally, supervisors should encourage the development of academic, technical, and transferable skills, provide constructive feedback, and help researchers develop and regularly review a career development plan. Institutions should provide a supportive environment, training, and professional development for supervisors.

While the MSCA Guidelines on Supervision are non-binding, funded projects are strongly encouraged to take them into account.

Supervision in the different MSCA funding lines

Supervision must be sufficiently addressed in all MSCA projects. The following table gives an overview of the different requirements:

Funding Line	Information about supervision	Involvement of the supervisor in application and/or selection processes
PF	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Researchers need one supervisor at host organisation, and one in a non-academic placement, (non-academic host organisation) • For Global Fellowships: Researchers need an additional supervisor at host organisation in Third Country and, • Co-supervision is generally possible, but must be justified in the proposal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supervisors are expected to actively contribute to the preparation and submission of the PF proposal
DN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Every doctoral candidate should have a supervisory team/PhD committee • This team/committee should comprise two to three supervisors <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a main supervisor (either academic or non-academic sector) • a supervisor from the other sector (if the planned secondment is at an institution in the other sector) • a supervisor from the associated partners (secondment) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supervisors should be involved in designing the different research projects for the respective fellows that are required to be described in the proposal • Supervisors should be involved in the recruitment process
COFUND	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A diverse pool of possible supervisors should be available to fellows to choose from and should expose them to various disciplines • Supervisors should be selected by fellows according to their needs and career goals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contact between applicants and fellows is allowed during the application process for scientific advice, research discussion, or information about expertise and infrastructure • Supervisors should not draft proposals or be required to provide their approval for submission, and they should not be involved in recruitment or decision-making to ensure impartiality
SE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seconded staff need a mentor on the premises of the secondment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • N/A

This table does not intend to replace the information given in the Guide for Applicants and the Proposal Template for the respective programme line. Applicants should refer to these documents when preparing their proposal.

For **PF, COFUND and DN**, the **description of supervision in the proposal** is as follows:

- The quality of supervision needs to be described in the proposal in addition to the supervisors' qualifications
- Supervision arrangements also must be described (i.e. how often will the supervisor(s) and fellow(s) meet)
- Each fellow should draft a Career Development Plan with their supervisor at the beginning of their fellowship. This plan should be updated regularly and serve as a guiding instrument for successful supervision
- Applicants should refer to the MSCA Guidelines on Supervision and include aspects from these in their proposal

Additional requirements:

DN: Each DN should have a Supervisory Board, in which all beneficiaries and supervisors are represented, including at least one doctoral candidate. The Supervisory Board is the main decision-making body in a DN and coordinates the network-wide training, research, and supervision activities.

COFUND:

A COFUND should have a Supervisory Board (including supervisors and representatives of fellows) which has the task of monitoring the progress of the research programme in addition to further aspects such as gender equality, arising issues or disputes regarding project progression, IPR, communication and dissemination, and risk management.

Joint supervision is crucial in MSCA DN and COFUND programmes. While mandatory for Joint and Industrial Doctorates, it is strongly recommended for standard DNs as well. In a DN, a supervisory team typically includes two to three supervisors: a main supervisor and another one, who could be from the other sector. In Industrial Doctorates and usually also in Joint Doctorates, the joint supervision of fellows by non-academic and academic supervisors ensures that fellows obtain a PhD adjusted to the needs of the industry. The proposal should clarify each supervisor's role and how they complement each other. Joint supervision provides access to diverse expertise and different sectors. It fosters professional networks and supports career development. It requires a uniform supervision policy across the consortium (especially in Joint Doctorates). In COFUND, each fellow should have two to three supervisors, including a primary supervisor, a co-supervisor. Additionally, as in PF and DN, a supervisor should also be present at the premises of the secondment.

Changing supervisors and/or host organisation

If a supervisor leaves an institution and the fellow cannot follow or if the collaboration between a fellow and a supervisor is no longer successful despite all efforts, supervisors may be changed.

To successfully change supervisors, it is important to find a supervisor with whom the project can be conducted as planned, including with regards to professional development. Fellows should first speak to their host organisation. The organisation will then contact the Project Officer to inform him or her about the proposed change. In order to change a scientific supervisor, a formal notification (with a letter of justification and the full CV of the new supervisor) must be submitted well before the change is scheduled to occur.

In case the fellow would like to change institutions as well, the current host organisation must agree. More on this can be found in this [Information note for Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellows in postdoctoral fellowships](#).

References and resources

[Horizon Europe Model Grant Agreement](#)

[Salzburg Recommendations](#)

[Principles for Innovative Doctoral Training](#)

[LERU-Delivering talent: Careers of researchers inside and outside academia](#)

[The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity](#)

[German presidency conference MSCA](#)

[MSCA Guidelines on Supervision](#)

[Recommendation on a European framework to attract and retain research, innovation and entrepreneurial talents in Europe](#)

[European Charter for Researchers](#)

[The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity](#)

[Change of Supervisor-Information note for Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellows in postdoctoral fellowships](#)

[MSCA end of fellowship survey](#)

[Lessons Learnt from the implementation of European Industrial Doctorates in Horizon 2020: report from the Cluster Event with European Industrial Doctorates](#)