

MSCA-NET

POLICY-BRIEF: WIDENING

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Introduction

This policy brief aims to provide a short comprehensive overview of the concept of Widening and to help researchers and organisations better understand Widening aspects in the context of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions. It is not intended to duplicate or otherwise replace existing EU guidance. Instead, it will bring different information sources together and highlight the most relevant resources for further information.

Introduction to Widening

Research and innovation potential is unevenly distributed across Europe. Due to this variation, the capability of successfully carrying out transnational research and innovation projects within Europe differs between countries. Some nations face more significant challenges than others, whether due to insufficient scientific infrastructure, limited network access, difficulties in maintaining and retaining talent, or structural barriers at institutional, regional, or national levels. To overcome the innovation divide and strive towards a more integrated and cohesive European research and innovation ecosystem, a dedicated Widening component has been included in European research and innovation Framework Programmes for more than a decade. Under Horizon 2020, the programme “Spreading Excellence and Widening Participation” (SEWP) was launched with a budget of approximately 1% of the framework programme’s overall budget, amounting to roughly EUR 800 million.

Widening in Horizon Europe

Under Horizon Europe, Widening was expanded and the budget significantly increased to 3.3% of Horizon Europe’s overall budget. This corresponds to approximately EUR 2.9 billion. The significant increase in the budget from Horizon 2020 to Horizon Europe illustrates the growing importance attributed to Widening measures under the current Framework Programme. Legislators mandated that Horizon Europe’s Widening measures encompass a portfolio of updated actions from Horizon 2020, accompanied by an ambitious “Advancing Europe Package”, featuring proposal pre-checks, a hop-on mechanism, and initiatives to promote excellence and brain circulation.

What are Widening countries?

As defined in the current [Work Programme](#)¹, the following countries are considered Widening countries under Horizon Europe: Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and all Associated Countries (AC) with equivalent characteristics in terms of R&I performance (Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Turkey, Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, Morocco, Tunisia, Ukraine, Faroe Islands) and the Outermost Regions (defined in Art. 349 TFEU).

According to the current [Work Programme](#), the “Widening Participation and Spreading Excellence” Programme has six key objectives:

- 1) “Encourage institutional reforms and transformation processes of the R&I system at national and regional level in Widening countries in line with the ERA principles
- 2) Mobilise national investments in R&I capacity in Widening countries
- 3) Raise the bar for excellence of R&I actors in Widening countries in partnership with outstanding European and international institutions (‘win—win situation’)

¹ Horizon Europe Work Programme 2023-2025, Widening participation and strengthening the European Research Area, p. 9f, as of October 2024

- 4) Increase number of participations and success rates of widening actors in research and innovation projects in other parts of Horizon Europe (notably in pillars 2 and 3)
- 5) Promote the creation of new innovation ecosystems and scale up existing ones by a set of measures, which include, among other, place based and international collaboration between academia and business in Widening countries
- 6) Foster brain circulation, including inter-sectoral mobility for researchers and innovators and turn it into brain gain for Widening countries”²

The significant disparities in research and innovation performance between countries participating in Horizon Europe are to be mitigated through targeted measures. These initiatives aim to unleash untapped potential for excellence and innovation. While distinct from the strategies and actions of the Structural Funds, they are designed to complement and interact with them. The measures are categorised into two destinations:

Destination 1: Improved Access to Excellence

- **Teaming:** Teaming addresses disparities in the European research and innovation landscape by aiming to establish or modernise centres of excellence in low R&I performing states through partnerships with leading institutions in Member States (MS) or AC in order to improve R&I performance at the beneficiary institutions in Widening countries. As a co-funded action, complementary funding from national, regional or European sources is required. Teaming projects have a duration of six years.
- **Twinning:** Twinning projects are funded for up to three years and aim to strengthen networking activities between research institutions in Widening countries and leading partners at the EU level. Due to its high success and participations rates, it's by far the most popular action within the entire Widening programme. The coordinating institution must be based in a Widening country and at least two organisations from a MS or AC must complement the consortium.
- **European Excellence Initiative (EEI):** The EEI aims to address major societal challenges through long-term collaboration between higher education institutions with the goal to transform the higher education sector and its surrounding ecosystems. Partnerships must include at least two institutions from Widening countries and two leading international institutions from different MS or AC. Projects should incorporate activities such as staff exchanges or workshops to promote institutional change and receive funding of up to EUR 1.5-2 million for up to three years.
- **Pathways to Synergies:** The pilot call distinguishes between “upstream” and “downstream synergies”. “Upstream synergies” pave the way for more successful Horizon Europe proposals through activities in the areas of human resources development or internationalisation strategies. “Downstream synergies” focus on the valorisation and adoption of Horizon Europe results. By supporting synergies, the aim is to accelerate the transfer of knowledge between partners and increase the technological maturity of innovations. Only legal entities established in Widening countries are eligible to participate as coordinators for the call. The expected EU contribution amounts to EUR 0.5 – 1.2 million per project.
- **Dissemination and Exploitation Support Facility:** This action is centered on activities aimed at enhancing or developing dissemination and exploitation (D&E) capacities in Widening countries. Legal entities established in Widening countries are eligible to participate as coordinators. Funding amounts to EUR 1 to 5 million per project. The consortium is expected to create a facility including training, upskilling, entrepreneurship, access to capital, best practice sharing, knowledge exchange and community of practice building for beneficiaries of Widening countries prioritising those involved in ongoing or completed Widening projects under Horizon 2020 or Horizon Europe.

² Horizon Europe Work Programme 2023-2025, Widening participation and strengthening the European Research Area, p. 19.

- **Hop-On Facility:** The Hop-on Facility allows applicants from Widening countries to join ongoing Pillar 2 and EIC Pathfinder projects, provided that the consortium agrees and no Widening partner is already involved. The new partner participates by contributing to a specific work package. There is one call per year with a total annual budget of EUR 40 million.
- **Excellence Hubs:** Excellence Hubs aim to create sustainable "place-based ecosystems" in Widening countries through joint research, innovation strategies, and collaboration among companies, research institutions, government agencies and society in general (the "quadruple helix"). These hubs must include at least two ecosystems from two different Widening countries. Excellence Hubs receive funding ranging from EUR 2 to 6 million per project for a project duration of up to 3 years.

Destination 2: Attracting and Mobilising the Best Talents

- **ERA Chairs:** This action helps universities and research institutions in Widening countries to attract and retain highly qualified personnel under the leadership of an outstanding researcher (ERA Chair holder). Institutions in these countries apply with a leading researcher in a specific scientific field. Funding for each ERA Chair ranges between EUR 1.5 and 2.5 million for a funding period of up to five years.
- **ERA Talents:** The "ERA Talents" call targets researchers, innovators, and science managers interested in working in the non-academic sector. It funds projects focusing on training and skills development applicable across sectors in order to enhance the employability of the target group. Secondments between academic and non-academic institutions are a key feature. Projects run up to four years and must be coordinated by an institution from a Widening country.
- **ERA Fellowships:** ERA Fellowships are granted to outstanding researchers who engage in cross-border mobility, by collaborating with a host organisation from either the academic or the non-academic sector in a Widening country. ERA Fellowships are aligned with the MSCA Postdoctoral Fellowships and thus provide a second chance for researchers to carry out their fellowship in a Widening country.

Widening and the MSCA

Opportunities for Institutions from Widening Countries across all Programme Lines

Institutions from Widening countries are encouraged to take part in the MSCA across all programme lines. They can participate as beneficiary or associated partner in Doctoral Networks and host and/or train doctoral candidates. Through a Doctoral network, institutions can collaborate with other (European) universities, research centres and companies. Institutions from Widening countries can also participate in MSCA COFUND and propose projects to co-fund doctoral and postdoctoral programmes. Staff Exchanges enable institutions in Widening countries to engage in short-term staff exchanges, helping them build or strengthen international research networks. These exchanges promote the transfer of knowledge and foster sustainable partnerships, enhancing the ability of Widening country institutions to engage more actively in excellent research. Institutions from Widening countries can also participate in MSCA and Citizens and thus increase the visibility of Widening country institutions on a broader scale. Institutions from Widening countries can also act as a host for MSCA Postdoctoral fellows, providing opportunities for researchers at institutions that may have less visibility in the global research landscape.

Aligned with the MSCA Postdoctoral Fellowships, ERA Fellowships provide a second chance for researchers to carry out their fellowship in a Widening country. The ERA Fellowships that are implemented through the [Work Programme “Widening participation and strengthening the European Research Area”](#) were introduced in Horizon 2020 as a widening extension of the regular MSCA Postdoctoral Fellowships offering targeted support for researchers to pursue their research project in a Widening country.

ERA Fellowships at a Glance

The ERA Fellowships were first launched as a pilot under the name “Widening Fellowships” in 2018 for the last three years of Horizon 2020 and aimed to encourage brain circulation towards Widening countries. In the three annual calls, a total of 125 Fellows were funded and the most successful MS were Portugal, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Cyprus. Under Horizon Europe, the Widening Fellowships were renamed ERA Fellowships.³

The Fellowships are open to researchers of any nationality who wish to participate in a research and innovation project for twelve to 24 months. Researchers may either come to Europe from any country in the world or relocate from within Europe to a Widening country. Researchers apply within the MSCA Postdoctoral Fellowships Call and give their consent to also apply for an ERA Fellowship. This means that a single evaluation is performed within the MSCA Postdoctoral Fellowships (PF) call. If the proposal does not secure a high enough ranking for funding under the PF call, given a consent, the application will automatically be resubmitted to the ERA Fellowships call. ERA Fellowships therefore provide applicants with an opportunity to significantly increase their chances of being funded. Proposals submitted to the ERA Fellowships programme must meet all the admissibility and eligibility requirements of the respective MSCA Postdoctoral Fellowships Call and also pass the threshold for that call.

Eligibility criteria in a nutshell:

A proposal can qualify for ERA Fellowships funding if it meets the following criteria:

- It is submitted by a host institution based in a Widening country
- It is admissible and eligible for MSCA-PF European Fellowships (EF)
- Consent has been given for the proposal be considered in the ERA Fellowships call
- It has passed the minimum quality threshold (70%) under the MSCA-PF-EF call
- It did not secure a spot on the main list under the MSCA-PF-EF-call

The ranking order for the ERA Fellowships call is based on the MSCA PF call scores and evaluation process. The MSCA PF Model Grant Agreement is used for ERA Fellowships. As is the case within the MSCA PF, secondments and non-academic placements are also possible within ERA Fellowships. Even though the applications are submitted and processed through the MSCA Postdoctoral Fellowships Call, successful applicants of the ERA Fellowships are not officially considered as MSCA fellows.

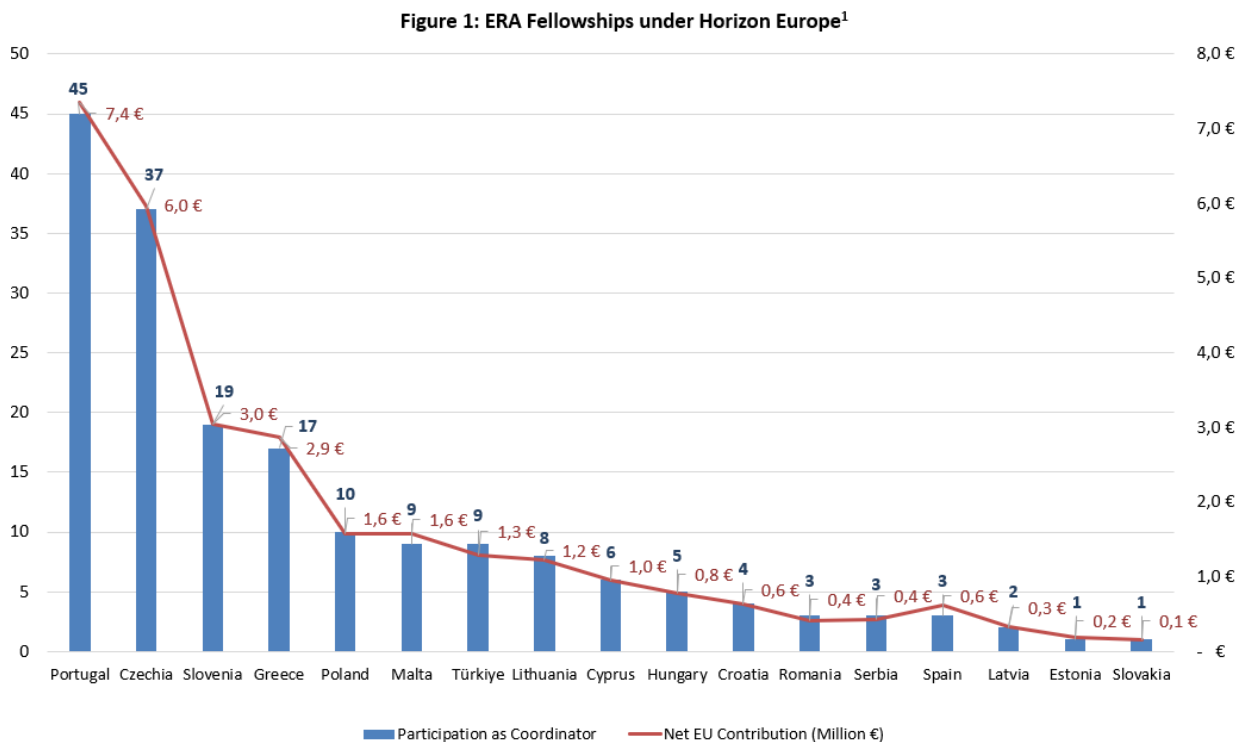
In the current [Work Programme 2023-2025](#)⁴ the budget of the annual ERA Fellowships calls amounts to EUR 8 million for each call.

[Success stories](#) of former and current ERA Fellowships holders as well as of institutions from Widening countries participating in the other MSCA programme lines are collected through the MSCA-NET project.

³ European Commission, Study on mobility flows of researchers in the context of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions: analysis and recommendation towards a more balanced brain circulation across the European Research Area, p. 8.

⁴ Horizon Europe Work Programme 2023-2025, Widening participation and strengthening the European Research Area, p. 68, 72

Geographical Distribution of ERA Fellowships Funding under Horizon Europe



¹ The figures refer to the following calls: HORIZON-WIDERA-2022-TALENTS-02, HORIZON-WIDERA-2022-TALENTS-04, HORIZON-WIDERA-2023-TALENTS-02
 datasource: eCorda - Database on contracts in Horizon Europe; status: 05/10/2024; project status: signed and closed projects

The above figure shows the geographical distribution of the ERA Fellowships taking the first three calls under Horizon Europe into consideration. Portugal and the Czech Republic are at the top of the list. Portuguese institutions were able to acquire 45 ERA Fellowships, Czech institutions 37.

The [Evaluation study on excellent science in the European framework programmes for research and innovation](#) published in 2024 confirmed that the second opportunity for funding through the ERA Fellowships is highly valued by both applicants and stakeholders. This recent study has therefore stressed once more that the ERA Fellowships are crucial in promoting mobility to Widening countries as the number of MSCA fellows choosing these destinations continues to be limited.

Overall, the Fellowships ensure a more balanced brain circulation with Widening countries and help promote the spread of excellence in research and innovation. The ERA Fellowships can be seen as a strategic effort within Horizon Europe to foster a more inclusive and balanced [European Research Area](#). Supporting researchers and institutions in less advanced R&I regions helps to reduce disparities and elevates the research capabilities in these regions, leading to a more integrated and innovative Europe.

Synergies between MSCA and Widening Participation and Spreading Excellence (WIDERA)

The MSCA and WIDERA work programmes are both pivotal in reinforcing and enhancing the effectiveness and inclusivity of the European Research Area. Aligned objectives foster synergies between both programmes that address disparities, promote excellence, and enhance the integration of Widening countries into the overall European research landscape.

Such synergies include:

Capacity building: The MSCA are aimed at fostering excellence in research and innovation which aligns with the objective of Widening measures supporting institutional reforms and research capacity building in Widening countries.

Mobility and Networking: The MSCA are the dedicated mobility programme within Horizon Europe promoting researcher mobility and cross-border collaboration supporting WIDERA's goal of integrating Widening countries into European research networks.

Career Development: Both programmes focus on advancing researchers' careers through training, skills development, and access to resources, contributing to their shared objective of increasing the employability of researchers.

Inclusivity and Gender Equality: The Widening measures are aimed at reducing disparities in research and innovation which aligns with the commitment of the MSCA to inclusivity, diversity as well as gender equality in research.

References and Resources

- **Widening in Horizon Europe**
 - [Work Programme 2023-25 Widening participation and strengthening the European Research Area](#)
 - [Horizon Europe Widening - Who should apply - European Commission](#)

- **Horizon Europe and MSCA**
 - [MSCA Work Programme 2023-2025](#)
 - [The European Research Area \(ERA\)](#)
 - [Knowledge ecosystems in the new ERA. Talent circulation and intersectoral mobility: pathways for a balanced talent circulation in EU](#)
 - [Evaluation study on excellent science in the European framework programmes for research and innovation](#)
 - [Success stories collected through the MSCA-NET project](#)