

Applying for an MSCA Postdoctoral Fellowship: A Fellow's Perspective

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Abstract

Applying for a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions Postdoctoral Fellowship (MSCA-PF) can be a complex and highly competitive process, especially for non-native English speakers. This guide, written by two scientists from Spain and the United Kingdom who were awarded MSCA-PF Global Fellowships under Horizon Europe, aims to provide a clear and practical roadmap for prospective applicants. Covering every step from designing a research project to writing a compelling proposal, this guide offers insights, tips, and strategies based on firsthand experience. We outline key aspects of the application process, share common challenges, and provide useful recommendations to strengthen your proposal. Our goal is to help future fellows navigate the intricacies of the MSCA-PF application with greater confidence and clarity. While this guide reflects our personal perspectives and experiences, it is intended as a supportive resource rather than an official document. The views and opinions expressed herein are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the granting authority nor the European Union.

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| <i>Abbreviation</i> | <i>Description</i> |
|---------------------|---|
| AC | (Horizon Europe) Associated Country |
| CDP | Career Development Plan |
| DMP | Data Management Plan |
| DOI | Digital Object Identifier |
| EC | European Commission |
| ECR | Early Career Researcher |
| EF | MSCA-PF European Fellowship |
| EU | European Union |
| FAIR | Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, and Reusable |
| GF | MSCA-PF Global Fellowship |
| MSCA-PF | Marie Skłodowska-Curie Action - Postdoctoral Fellowship |
| NCP | National Contact Point |
| OA | Open Access |
| PID | Persistent Identifier |
| RO | Research Objective |
| WP | Work Package |

Table 1: *List of abbreviations used in this guide.*

Introduction

The Marie Skłodowska-Curie Action Postdoctoral Fellowships (MSCA-PF) are a component of the Horizon Europe programme with the goal of supporting postdoctoral researchers to undertake ambitious, independent, and international research for 1–3 years. Proposals are accepted across all disciplines, can include secondments and non-academic placements, and the programme is in principle open to applicants from all nationalities.

MSCA-PF is split into two streams. **European Postdoctoral Fellowships (EF)** take place in an EU Member State or Horizon Europe Associated Country (AC) and provide funding for 1–2 years. **This stream is open to applicants from all nationalities.** **Global Postdoctoral Fellowships (GF)** include an outgoing phase of 1–2 years outside Europe, followed by a return phase of 1 year in the EU or a Horizon Europe AC. Contrary to the European PF, Global PF are restricted to nationals or long-term residents of EU member states or Horizon Europe ACs. In both cases, a mobility requirement also applies: applicants must not have resided or conducted their main activity in the host/outgoing country for more than 12 months in the 36 months preceding the MSCA-PF call deadline. Approximately 90% of applications are submitted through the European programme, but the proportion of successfully funded proposals is similar across both streams.

The process of applying for a MSCA-PF is complicated and time-consuming, more so than many other postdoctoral fellowship programmes. There is no ‘magic bullet’ for a successful application, but there are many unwritten rules (or rules written in incomprehensible EU legalese) that may not be obvious to early career researchers (ECRs), which we hope to clarify with this guide. However, it is also important to state from the outset that luck and other matters outside our control are – unfortunately – a large part of success in academia. While we should strive to write the most competitive application possible, the peer-review process is subjective, and reviewers may be subject to biases (subconscious or otherwise). Applicants should be prepared for this, and successful applicants must also be humble enough to avoid the survivorship bias that can come from academic success.

On the other hand, postdoctoral fellowships funded through MSCA are prestigious and generously funded (including a mobility allowance, and a family allowance for eligible researchers). Particularly for ECRs interested in an academic career in Europe, MSCA-PF is one of the best options available (in some countries, they may be one of the only available routes to fund independent postdoctoral research). As a result, we have prepared this guide in the hope that it will support others in turning their exciting research ideas into reality.

MSCA-PF applications are submitted via the [EU Funding & Tenders Portal](#) and are split into two parts (Part A and Part B). Part A is essentially administrative and is completed through a set of web forms. This part includes the abstract, project descriptors, participant information, ethics & security, and the project budget (which is calculated automatically based on the countries the proposed project will take place in). Completing Part A is generally fairly straightforward, except in cases where the project requires a detailed Ethics Self-Assessment. For this reason, Part A is not the focus of this guide. The more demanding section is Part B, which is further split into Part B-1 (a 10-page research and training proposal) and Part B-2 (further details, including a full CV, overview(s) of the participating organisation(s), environmental considerations, and letter(s) of commitment from associated partners hosting the outgoing phase, if relevant). Part B-1 is the focus of the *Writing your proposal* section of this guide.

We emphasise that this guide is written from the perspective of successful MSCA-PF applicants and **is not an official or endorsed publication by Horizon Europe**. Official guidance is available from the [European Commission](#) and you should be using this as your primary resource. Further useful information is provided by [MSCA-NET](#). This guide is primarily **opinion** based on our experiences (our proposals both scored above 98%) and conversations we have had with colleagues. Most of the content of this guide should therefore be interpreted as well-meaning suggestions rather than authoritative guidance, but we hope that our perspective will be useful for future applicants as they prepare their proposals. To distinguish official guidance from our opinions, we have highlighted text and facts taken directly from official MSCA documentation [in blue](#).

Should you apply?

Are you eligible?

The eligibility criteria are clearly defined: at the time of writing, you must have a PhD by the application deadline and a maximum of eight years experience in research¹. You must not have resided or carried out your work or studies in the host country (outgoing phase only for GF) for more than 12 months in the 36 months preceding the call deadline. For GF, you must also be an EU or AC national. There are some further restrictions to be aware of if you submitted an application for the same or similar project in the previous year that received a score below 70%. Also note that these formal requirements, while correct at the time of writing, can change between calls so make sure you check the requirements for your specific call.

Can you submit a competitive application?

While we are not aware of official statistics for the academic background of MSCA-PF applicants, it is important to consider the fact that the overall success rate for MSCA-PF applications is typically around 15%. Producing a successful MSCA-PF application therefore represents a considerable time investment to design a well thought-out project proposal. While your CV is *not* the most important part of the application (in contrast to many other postdoctoral fellowship programmes), a strong CV *relative to your career stage*² will likely be beneficial.

Can you (and do you want to) lead your own research project?

MSCA-PF are specifically for postdoctoral researchers intending to lead their own research project. The program is not designed to fund research that will be performed as part of an existing research project. You should also consider whether a MSCA-PF will support your career objectives (indeed, *this is actually part of the application*). A MSCA-PF will likely be most useful for those interested in pursuing an academic research career in Europe, although the Fellowship does encourage the exploration of career paths beyond academia, and positively considers placements in industry.

Do you have enough time?

The application deadline is usually in early September. Preparing a MSCA-PF application takes considerable time (several months in most cases), not just for you as the applicant, but also for the *beneficiary*, i.e. the host institution. The research/EU office at your host institution and/or National Contact Points (NCPs)³ may be able to provide valuable advice and feedback for your application, but they are often very busy close to the deadline, so contacting them last-minute is not a good idea. You should therefore start preparing your application as early as possible. The official call for proposals is usually in April, but application materials are generally similar from year to year, so you can start preparing earlier if you want. We would suggest starting your preparation by May. As an example, here are the rough timelines we followed when preparing our applications:

- Started contacting potential supervisors in May, started writing the proposal in late June (required around 3 months of preparation full-time).
- Started contacting potential supervisors in April, started writing the proposal in April (required around 5 months of preparation part-time).

¹ Please see the guidelines on how these eight years are calculated. The calculation is quite progressive; for instance, maternity/paternity leave, long-term sick leave, and career breaks or time spent outside academic research are not included in the eight years.

² According to data from 2022, there was little correlation between MSCA-PF success rate and years of postdoctoral experience.

³ Not all NCPs review applications. At the time of writing and based on discussions with other Fellows, we believe that the Belgium, Czechia, Germany, Denmark, Estonia, Italy, Luxembourg, and Slovakia NCPs *do* review proposals, whereas the UK, France and Spain NCPs *do not*.

Designing your research project

Developing a research idea

The quality of the proposal is the most important part of the MSCA-PF assessment process. Developing a novel, exciting, and well thought-out research project is therefore very important. If you don't already have a general idea for a research project, review papers often outline major 'open questions' in the field, which you can use as a starting point. General reading of the recent literature in your field of interest will also help you identify gaps in understanding, which your project could address. If you have multiple ideas and have difficulty choosing, consider the following:

- MSCA-PF targets interdisciplinary research, and the [assessment criteria include the “quality and novelty of the research options... in terms of science, **interdisciplinarity**, **inter-sectorality** and level of international mobility”](#). If the proposed project does not include interdisciplinary approaches, [you are required to justify why](#).
- Training is a significant component of the MSCA-PF programme, and the [“quality of the supervision, training and of the two-way \(three-way for GF\) transfer of knowledge between the researcher and the host \(and the associated partner for GF\)” and the “quality, novelty and pertinence of the research training programme” are assessment criteria](#). If the proposed research solely relies on skills you have already mastered, it will be very difficult to fulfil these criteria.
- [‘Impact’ represents 30% of the reviewers’ score for MSCA-PF proposals](#). ‘Impact’ is broadly defined, but it may be easier to demonstrate [“the magnitude and importance of... the expected scientific, societal, and economic impacts” assessment criterion](#) for some projects than others.
- Research independence - MSCA-PF projects must be standalone, and should not be a continuation of a current or existing project.
- [Horizon Europe projects are guided by three main strategic orientations: the Green Transition, the Digital Transition, and a more resilient, competitive, inclusive, and democratic Europe](#). These orientations aim to address key EU priorities and global challenges through research and innovation, as outlined in the [Horizon Europe strategic plan 2025-2027](#). Projects that align with this strategic plan may have more chances to be funded.

Identifying supervisors

Existing collaborators

The MSCA-PF supervisor(s) can be existing collaborators or previous supervisors, within the limits of the MSCA mobility rules. Already having a good working relationship with a potential supervisor has advantages - they may be more likely to agree to support your application, and you can have confidence that they will be a good supervisor. In some cases, applicants start a postdoctoral position abroad without a MSCA-PF and develop their MSCA-PF proposal during their first year. This has the benefit of not requiring a project idea in advance, and it is easier to develop a project together in person. It is also easier to explain the transfer of knowledge because you will have been working in their research group for a few months, so you will know what they can learn from you (and vice-versa).

It is more difficult to justify [“the two-way \(three-way for GF\) transfer of knowledge”](#) if you have already worked extensively (i.e. more than a year) with the proposed supervisor. Demonstrating the potential for professional development may also be more challenging. In this case, you should carefully justify what *novel* opportunity there is for knowledge transfer and personal development (i.e. demonstrate that this is not just an easy continuation of your previous work), and you could also consider bringing new collaborators into the proposed project.

New collaborators

Based on our experience, it is more common to choose a MSCA-PF supervisor(s) you do not already have a working relationship with, for instance relevant senior academics you have identified from the academic literature. In this case, we would consider the following:

- Before contacting a new collaborator, it is worth already having a reasonably well thought-through idea first so it doesn't look like you're trying to steal ideas. However, you should probably contact supervisors

before seriously starting work on the proposal, because the supervisor might have great new ideas to contribute to the research plan.

- The “**quality of supervision**” appears in multiple assessment criteria, and the application requires you to discuss the supervisor(s) accomplishments. This does not mean that you should select supervisors purely on the basis of their publication metrics, but you do have to demonstrate that they will be a capable supervisor (both from a research and professional development perspective). It may be more difficult to demonstrate that an academic is an outstanding supervisor if they are early in their career (although we do not have statistics to support this). The supervisor’s research expertise should allow them to meaningfully supervise your project, although they do not have to be an expert in all aspects of the proposed research. Specific criteria that are valued in project supervisors include (i) how many people they have mentored and where they are now working and (ii) whether the supervisor has previous experience with European projects (e.g. ERC or supervising previous MSCA-PF fellows). If you have a supervisor in mind who would be ideal for the project but is less experienced, you could consider adding a more established academic as a co-supervisor (or supervisor for one of the phases for GF). Alternatively, you could emphasise in your application that a less experienced (early career) supervisor might have more time to closely support your progress and development.
- As well as the supervisor themselves, the host institution also matters. You need to show that the host institution will allow you to perform your research effectively, and provide you with career development opportunities (such as research skills training, teaching opportunities, and so on).
- “**The two/three-way transfer of knowledge between the researcher and the host**” is also an assessment criterion, meaning that you are expected to transfer knowledge back. This will not be your primary consideration when choosing a supervisor (and host institution) since you will almost certainly be able to find ways to transfer knowledge back (for instance through group meetings and seminars), whatever the host, but it is something to bear in mind. This is easiest to explain for GF, since you will learn new techniques during the outgoing phase and can transfer this to the host institution during the returning phase.
- Finally, but probably most importantly, avoid problematic supervisors. There are many extraordinary researchers and supervisors, but bad apples exist; although you are an independent researcher, the wrong supervisor can still cause huge problems for you. Joining a toxic research group is not worth it, regardless how prestigious it is. Put out feelers or talk to current or previous supervisees if possible.

If you have any mutual contacts, ask them to introduce you - this will give you the best chance of being taken seriously. Otherwise, in general, ‘cold emailing’ is acceptable in academia. If you contact an academic out of the blue, bear in mind:

- Formality and customs vary greatly by country and discipline, but you should use the addressee’s correct academic title in your first email, and take care with your writing. If they reply, their sign-off will indicate how they would like to be addressed in subsequent communications.
- Use a professional (ideally academic) email address.
- Your email should be as concise as possible (while addressing the points below).
- Start your email with a very brief introduction (your name, current position, and broad research interest).
- Explain that you are intending to apply for a MSCA-PF. Most senior academics in Europe will be familiar with the programme, but most academics outside Europe (relevant for GF applicants) will not.
- Give an outline of your research idea. Concisely explain the main goals and an overview of the approach you intend to take. If this was not already clear from your introduction, state in one sentence why you are ideally qualified to perform this research.
- Explain why you are asking them to supervise your project. The purpose of this section is to explain how they can help you, and how you can help them. This section *must* be personalised to the addressee, and you should show a good understanding of their research interests and research group. It will be extremely obvious to the addressee if you have not properly researched them, and copy-and-paste emails will almost certainly be ignored.
- Conclude with a call to action (e.g. asking to set up a Zoom call to discuss details).
- Attaching a *short* (5 pages maximum) CV is a good idea. They might not read it, but an impressive CV improves the likelihood of them taking you seriously.
- Do not use AI to generate your email! It is usually very obvious and if you can’t be bothered to put time into writing an email yourself, you can’t expect them to put time into replying.

You may not get replies to all of your emails but, in our experience, well-written enquiries have a high response

rate.

Our personal experience was as follows:

- Chose a senior supervisor (and younger co-supervisor) for the outgoing phase, with no prior collaboration. Chose a senior supervisor (past postdoctoral supervisor) for the returning phase.
- Chose a senior supervisor for the outgoing phase, who was a previous collaborator. Chose a senior supervisor for the returning phase, with no prior collaboration (but mutual contacts).

Writing your proposal

The main proposal of your MSCA-PF application (Part B) follows a clear and strictly defined structure. It is very important to state from the outset that your MSCA-PF application is *not* exclusively about the proposed research. Training is a central part of MSCA (an underlying aim is improving the quality of academic training across Horizon Europe member states) and this is reflected in the MSCA-PF assessment criteria. The MSCA-PF Part B template and MSCA-PF Handbook clearly outline what each section has to address, and we therefore do not focus on the contents here. However, it can be useful to have specific examples to use as a reference when writing your proposal. In this section, we (i) outline the documents you should read and reference as you write your proposal, and (ii) give examples of responses and example sentences that might be useful for your proposal preparation (obviously, **do not** plagiarise from this guide!).

Reference documents

The following documents are essential reading as you prepare to write your proposal:

- **The MSCA-PF Guide for Applicants:** This [official](#) guide is available from the MSCA webpage and contains basic important information for the Fellowships. Make sure you are using the guide for your particular call, because it can change somewhat from year to year.
- **The MSCA-PF Part B template:** This [official](#) template will be available on the call page on the EU *Funding & Tenders Portal*. In addition to formatting, the template contains important guidance for what you must address in each section. **You must follow the guidance in the template.** Make sure you are using the template for your particular call, because it can change somewhat from year to year.
- **The MSCA Evaluation Form:** This [official](#) form contains the key evaluation criteria used for MSCA-PF proposal evaluation.
- **The MSCA-PF Handbook:** MSCA-NET produces a useful *unofficial* handbook for preparing MSCA-PF proposals, with many examples of specific strengths and weaknesses identified from previous applications.
- **The MSCA Green Charter:** This [official](#) document is important to be aware of when you design your project, particularly for the *Environmental considerations in light of the MSCA Green Charter* section of the proposal.
- **Previous successful applications:** Having one or two examples of successful MSCA-PF applications will be extremely useful as you write your proposal. If you do not personally know a MSCA-PF recipient, ask your host scientist(s) if they can put you in contact with one. We both had examples of successful applications to guide us when we were writing our proposals, and this was invaluable.

We also recommend reading the following documents:

- **The Horizon Europe Strategic Plan:** This [official](#) document outlines the strategic priorities for Horizon Europe, which is useful to reference throughout your application, particularly in section 2 of Part B1.
- **MSCA Guidelines on Supervision:** This [official](#) document outlines the MSCA Guidelines on Supervision, which is useful to consider as you write the *Quality of the supervision* section of the proposal.
- **MSCA Keywords:** This [official](#) document lists the keywords you will have to select from to describe your proposal. These keywords will be used to assign reviewers.
- **Horizon Europe Programme Guide:** While not specific to MSCA, this [official](#) document provides an overview of the Horizon Europe programme (of which MSCA is a component).
- **EU Grants: How to complete your ethics self-assessment:** This [official](#) document contains guidance on completing the ethics self-assessment, which is a required part of the application.
- **UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):** Be aware of the 17 UN SDGs; referencing these can be useful for section 2 of Part B1.
- **The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity:** This document sets out principles for good research practice.
- **Other EU documents relevant to your research area:** For example, the MSCA-NET *Policy-Brief: Missions in HE* document contains examples relevant to several research areas.

In addition to the above resources, many NCPs (and universities) organise MSCA-PF seminars/webinars, often run by NCPs themselves, university research officers, and/or previous Fellows. We recommend keeping

an eye out for these events, particularly since they may emphasise changes that arise in your year's call for proposals. Recorded seminars and documents produced by NCPs can sometimes be available on NCP websites and/or elsewhere on the internet.

General tips and suggestions

- **Throughout the proposal, be as specific as possible.** We cannot stress enough how important this is! Vague statements are not helpful. For instance, the difference between saying “the results will be published in open-access papers” and “the results will be published as three original articles and two systematic reviews, targeting journals X, Y, and Z with impact factor A, B, and C” is huge.
- Emphasise key words or phrases using **bold**, *italics*, or underlining.
- Figures are often useful in a proposal for background information, a schematic overview of the project, any preliminary results you might have, etc. (2 – 5 is a reasonable number).
- Tables can be very useful for structuring many subsections of the proposal, such as the WPs/ROs, expected outputs, conferences, supervisor profiles, risk assessment, etc.
- Use cross-referencing within the proposal to highlight links between sections.
- Enumerating subsections (as we have done in this guide) can improve the clarity of your proposal structure. You can add subsections that are not included in the MSCA-PF Part B template to help structure your proposal.
- Use numbered references and a two-column reference list or footnotes to save space, and include only the essential info (e.g. you can remove titles and DOIs).
- The grey box at the bottom of the page (Part B - Page X of 10) can be moved outside of the margin, giving a bit more space. You can also reduce the font size of the machine-readable tags (the strange sets of letters and numbers included in the Part B template that helps the system automatically read your proposal). However, make sure that you do not violate the formatting rules (e.g. you must adhere to the minimum font size, spacing, and margin size).
- Try to make your proposal as memorable as possible. Creating a simple logo for your project (containing the acronym) is a nice idea; you could put this together in Powerpoint, Illustrator or Inkscape. It is also worth putting some effort into coming up with a good title/acronym for the logo, and consistently refer to this throughout the proposal.

Criterion 1 – Excellence (Weight: 50%, c. 5–6 pages)

1.1. Quality and pertinence of the project's research and innovation objectives (and the extent to which they are ambitious, and go beyond the state of the art) (c. 1.5 pages)

This section explains *the problem* (and context required to understand *the problem*), why solving this problem is important according to the **EU goals and priorities**, and a top-level overview (i.e. the Work Packages, WPs) of how your project will solve *the problem* and how your approach **goes beyond the state of the art**. This is arguably the single most important part of the proposal since it is your chance to create a positive first impression for the reviewer.

Work Packages are ways of structuring the entire research project into a set of more manageable chunks, with each WP addressing specific Research Objectives (ROs). This may be a bit confusing if you have not come across this language before, but you just need to split your project workload into logical chunks. As an indication of the workload associated with a WP, a typical MSCA-PF will include 2–4 research WPs (plus three additional compulsory WPs for (i) project management, (ii) training and knowledge transfer, and (iii) dissemination, communication, and exploitation). Note that more WPs does not necessarily mean more work.

As with all sub-criteria, you can choose how you structure this section, but here is an example structure:

1.1.1. Introduction & state-of-the-art

- Concisely give any context required to understand the question(s) your proposal will address.
- Explain *the problem* that you have identified and why it is important to solve it.
- Convince the reader that this will be a **unique opportunity to solve the problem**.
- You can state your main hypotheses here (if relevant).

Example sentences – 1.1.1.

“Larval dispersal is an important process in setting the population structure, population dynamics, and biogeography of many marine taxa, as it controls the the migration of individuals between discrete marine populations.”

“A current goal in ecological research is to quantitatively assess trophic relationships among spatially heterogeneous and contiguous connected habitats. Nevertheless, studies of trophic network structure at large spatial, temporal and taxonomical scales remain relatively scarce in marine ecosystems.”

1.1.2. Objectives (Work Packages)

- Include the title of your project (and spell out the acronym).
- Clearly explain the main aim of the project, the project structure in terms of WPs, and which ROs will be addressed by each WP.
- It is a good idea to give a title for each WP before describing it in greater detail.

Example sentences – 1.1.2.

“Although it is well-known that food supply is a key factor driving these processes, trophic dynamics in these systems are far from understood, and this project offers a unique opportunity to go beyond the state-of-the-art and analyze the trophic complexity and flow kinetics applying a multidisciplinary approach.”

“[Project name] ([acronym spelled out], logo in Figure 1) will address this critical information gap by fulfilling the following research objectives (RO):”

1.1.3. Originality and innovative aspects of the research (going beyond the state-of-the-art)

- Convince the reader that your proposal is unique, innovative and goes beyond the state-of-the-art.
- Describe the significance of the project outcomes.

Example sentences – 1.1.3.

“To our knowledge, the proposed interdisciplinary approach is unprecedented in the study of food web interactions.”

“This research will bring new perspectives to the development of indicators of connectivity, important to predict sensitivity of the pelagic food web to future changes, and useful in ecosystem and conservation management.”

1.2. Soundness of the proposed methodology (including interdisciplinary approaches, consideration of the gender dimension and other diversity aspects if relevant for the research project, and the quality of open science practices) (c. 2–3 pages)

This section is basically the technical methodology, plus how the project will address the MSCA priorities of interdisciplinarity, diversity, and open science. Below, we have outlined a possible structure for this section.

1.2.1. Overall methodology

- List and develop/explain each WP (divided into tasks) and relate each WP to corresponding RO(s). This could be formatted as a table to clearly distinguish between WPs.
- You can mention the non-scientific WPs, but they do not need to be described in detail here.
- For projects based at multiple institutions, clearly state where each WP will take place.
- Explain the methods (e.g. laboratory experiments, field work, new techniques you will learn, equipment you will operate, software development, etc.) concisely but in sufficient detail to convincingly and clearly communicate the approach to subject experts. This will likely take 1–2 pages.
- Figure(s) will likely be helpful to illustrate methods.

| WP | Task | Work Package Contents | Months | Location |
|-----|------|---|--------|----------|
| WP1 | 1.1 | ... | M1–○ | ... |
| ... | ... | ... | ... | ... |
| WP○ | - | Training and knowledge transfer | M1–○ | ... |
| WP○ | - | Research dissemination and exploitation | M1–○ | ... |
| WP○ | - | Project management | M1–○ | ... |

WP1: ○ (Institution ○, Months 1–○, RO1–○)

WP1.1: ○ (Months ○–○, RO○–○)

...

WP1.2: ○ (Months ○–○, RO○–○)

...

WP2: ○ (Institution ○, Months ○–○, RO○–○)

WP2.1: ○ (Months ○–○, RO○–○)

...

WP2.2: ○ (Months ○–○, RO○–○)

...

...

1.2.2. Integration of methods and disciplines to pursue the objectives

- This section addresses the interdisciplinarity priority of MSCA.
- Refer to *specific MSCA keywords and knowledge fields* related to your project.
- You could also mention specific project collaborators and their contributions (apart from the supervisors) *if* it supports this point.

Example sentences – 1.2.2.

“The project integrates methods, tools and perspectives from a variety of disciplines in at least four knowledge fields (Chemistry, Environmental and Geosciences, Mathematics, and Social sciences): Analytical chemistry (chromatography, microscopy, physical chemistry), Population biology (animal behavior, ecology, food-webs), Applied mathematics (statistics, numerical modelling), and Political science (EU research policy).”

“The results of this research are expected to have translational impact in the EU marine policy (sustainable ecosystem management and conservation), and in other fields such as Molecular biology, a key inter-disciplinary aspect of this action.”

1.2.3. Gender dimension and other diversity aspects

- This section addresses the diversity priority of MSCA, in relation to research methods *and* communication/dissemination activities.
- This section explicitly does *not* refer to the gender balance of the research group or institution.
- Most projects will be relevant to some aspect of diversity, even if it isn't initially obvious. Think very carefully about this before stating that there is no diversity aspect to the project, since most projects will have some diversity aspect. For instance, conducting lab experiments with male and female individuals, geographic variability in data availability, how your research or dissemination activities could have an impact on specific gender or diversity groups, working with local communities, etc.

Example sentences – 1.2.3.

“We will choose participants in mentoring/outreach activities, ensuring that underrepresented demographics are inclusively and equitably included, particularly with respect to gender and indigenous communities in ○.”

1.2.4. Open science practices and research data management

- This section addresses the open science priority of MSCA, as well as data management.
- Describe the research outputs you will be providing open-access (OA), e.g. publications (including preprints), datasets, protocols, code, samples, etc.
- Refer to EU OA policies and FAIR principles.
- Describe the trusted repositories you will use and for what.
- Make sure you specifically refer to the Data Management Plan (DMP, which can be prepared using the DMP template from Horizon Europe) and the allocation of Persistent Identifiers, or PIDs (e.g. DOIs) to research outputs.
- Be aware that, unless your host institution has specific OA agreements (e.g. transitional agreements), OA article processing charges will need to be covered using your research budget.

Example sentences – 1.2.4.

“We will publish all metadata in standardised file formats following FAIR principles.”

“Datasets will be archived in trusted repositories under a CC-BY 4.0 license.”

“Publication fees for OA will be covered using funding allotted by MSCA.”

“Datasets will be made available using interoperable file-formats and will be assigned DOIs.”

“Preprints will be made available for all submitted manuscripts (e.g. on EGU sphere).”

“We will prioritise journals with an open peer-review process, e.g. *○*.”

You could summarise the DMP as a table, such as the example below:

| WP | Output | Dataset size | Management |
|-----|--------|--------------|--|
| ○ | ○ | ○ TB | ○ repository (Core Trust Seal certified) |
| ○ | ○ | ○ GB | ○ repository (Core Trust Seal certified) |
| ... | ... | ... | ... |

1.3. *Quality of the supervision, training and of the two (or three) way transfer of knowledge between the researcher and the host (c. 1–2 pages)*

1.3.1. Qualifications and experience of the supervisors

- Concisely explain the position and professional experience of the project supervisor(s), including an overview of their publication metrics (and relevant journals they have published in, if applicable), professional appointments, number of students and postdocs supervised (including details on how many have achieved faculty positions if relevant), previous experience in supervising MSCA fellows if relevant, major awards (particularly EU-funded grants), total career research funding, prizes, and any other notable achievements.
- In addition to the status and reputation of the supervisor(s), it is also essential that they are a good fit for the proposed project. This section should include a specific justification for why they are the ideal supervisor for your proposal.
- If you have a co-supervisor for any PF phases, you should also explain their importance to the project and how they will contribute to your professional development here.
- This can be (partially or entirely) summarised as a table.

Example supervisor overview table:

| Scientific production | Partner 1 | Partner 2 | Host |
|--|-----------|-----------|------|
| Experience in the field (years) | ... | ... | ... |
| Peer-reviewed articles in JCR journals | ... | ... | ... |
| h-index, total citations (<i>Google Scholar</i>) | ... | ... | ... |
| Total funding generated | ... | ... | ... |
| Graduate students supervised | ... | ... | ... |
| Postdocs supervised | ... | ... | ... |
| Oceanographic research cruises | ... | ... | ... |

Example sentences – 1.3.1.

“Professor ○ has a long history in researching coral dispersal/connectivity using genetics, behaviour & modelling (responsible for much of the formative literature in the field), so is ideally positioned to supervise this project.”

“Professor ○ has published in the most prestigious (○) and specialized (○) journals.”

“Dr ○ has an exceptional experience in mentoring, having directly supervised ○ graduate students, ○ PhD and ○ postdocs, who now lead successful academic careers, such as ○. ”

1.3.2. Training

- Outline the training programme for the project.
- Many applicants assume that this is a less-important part of the proposal, but training is actually a priority for MSCA-PF projects, so it is important to take this section seriously.
- Consider defining a set of **Training Objectives (TOs)** analogous to the ROs, and relate these to the various training activities you will undertake as part of the Fellowship.
- Explain how (research) training activities will support specific tasks in your WPs.
- Training doesn't just include research skills, but also soft skills for general career development. For example, if you are going to a country where a different language is spoken, taking language courses will be valued by reviewers. Academic leadership courses will be particularly useful to mention if you have stated in section 2.1 that you are intending to follow an academic career path. Transferable skills such as communication, independent and critical thinking, leadership, and project and budget management are all also very useful.
- Training could also include external courses from other institutions or providers (assuming this is logistically and financially feasible).
- As with all other aspects of the proposal, be **specific** when describing the training programme. Give the specific details for the training you will undertake, and well-known/validated programs will be appreciated by reviewers.
- Specifically explain how the activities (1) are realistic, and (2) will support your research and/or professional development.

Example sentences – 1.3.2.

“I will further develop analytical/statistical skills under the supervision of Professor ○ alongside WP2 as per the CDP, supporting my goal of leading future projects incorporating genetic data.”

“Extensive training for academic careers is provided at ○. I will participate in the ○ Program, and will obtain direct support from supervisors in preparing applications for faculty positions (and a CDP). I will improve my teaching skills by designing and delivering 2-10 hours of lectures/problem classes for the ○ course run by Professor ○, and a climate workshop at ○.”

“Thanks to the large experience of the host group in the study of ○, I will be trained in classic techniques (○) and semi-automatic methods (○), complementing my technical skills on ○.”

1.3.3. Transfer of knowledge from the researcher to the host institution and (GF only) associated partner

- Describe your expertise, and how this will benefit the host institution (including the supervisor's research group) and, in the case of GF, the associated partner institution.

Example sentences – 1.3.3.

"We have agreed to work closely due to our exceptionally complementary research interests, with two-way exchange of data and expertise."

"I will supervise students, collaborate and co-publish with other lab members, and share my network of collaborators with the lab team."

"During the outgoing phase, I will acquire a set of new scientific skills (see ○) that will be hands-on implemented in the host institution during the incoming phase to carry out WP○."

1.3.4. Transfer of knowledge from the host institution and (GF only) associated partner to the researcher

- Describe the expertise of the supervisors and resources provided by the host institution and (GF only) associated partner, and how this will contribute to the project and your professional development.
- This section will be closely related to your Career Development Plan (CDP).
- For GF, this is another opportunity to mention how knowledge and skills obtained from the associated partner will also benefit the host institution.

Example sentences – 1.3.4.

"Professor ○ will provide training in population genetics using surplus samples gathered from previous field campaigns across the Indo-Pacific, which will provide new data to support WP○. I will later transfer these analytic skills to the host institution through a workshop (WP○)."

"I will gain new scientific skills through research training, including the application of stable isotope techniques (...). I will be trained on open science, digital tools, leadership, etc. through research and taking specific training courses. I will upgrade/acquire transferable skills in communication, leadership, teamwork, etc. These skills will be essential to meet the proposed scientific objectives, and will be implemented in the host institution during the incoming phase"

1.4. Quality and appropriateness of the researcher's professional experience, competences and skills (c. 0.25-0.5 pages)

- Describe your strengths (both research and broader professional skills), illustrated by specific examples from your research background.
- This could include research expertise, technical skills, funding acquisition, international research experience, academic citizenship, teaching/supervising/mentoring, involvement in collaborative projects, awards, prizes...
- Be specific: illustrate everything with examples. Provide detailed information such as the number of (first-author and total) publications in Q1 journals, specific journals you have published in, total funding obtained, and so on.
- Focus on the most impressive points here - your full CV will be available in part B2.
- Convince the reviewers that **you are the right person to carry out this ambitious project**. There is a time and a place for modesty - this is not it!

Example sentences – 1.3.3.

"I presented my research findings in national and international conferences and workshops (○ contributions, ○ as first author, ○ oral presentations)."

"I have published ○ peer-reviewed papers (○ first-author), which have been covered in international news and policy briefings (○ and ○). This demonstrates my productivity and capacity for high-quality, high-impact research."

Criterion 2 – Impact (Weight: 30%, c. 2.5 pages)

2.1. Credibility of the measures to enhance the career perspectives and employability of the researcher and contribution to his/her skills development (c. 0.5 pages)

- Explain why **this MSCA project** will be a turning point in your scientific career, allowing you to achieve your long-term goals, giving specific examples.
- If possible, also mention the impact that collaborations established during the project will have on your professional development.

Example sentences – 2.1.

“I intend for this Fellowship to act as a final stepping-stone towards establishing a research group in ○ as an Assistant Professor or junior research group leader (e.g. ○).”

“Through this Fellowship, I will continue to build my research profile and niche in ○ and develop world-leading expertise in ○ and ○.”

“Collaboration with top authors in this field will result in, at least, 3 publications in top OA journals (B1-2.2.1), increasing my visibility into a wide research community.”

“Through this training programme, I will further develop essential skills for a career as an academic leader, including oral & written communication, management, and teaching.”

2.2. Suitability and quality of the measures to maximise expected outcomes and impacts, as set out in the dissemination and exploitation plan, including communication activities (c. 1 page)

- In this section, refer specifically to the Communication, Dissemination & Exploitation Plan (project deliverable).

2.2.1. Dissemination activities

- Describe the intended dissemination activities and their target audiences (e.g. the scientific community in specific fields, policy makers, regulatory authorities, etc.).
- Refer to peer-reviewed publications, conferences and meetings, social media, newsletters, etc.
- Provide detailed and specific information, e.g. targeted journals (with IF), conferences and meetings (with a short description, the relevance and importance of the conference, expected dates, and attendees if possible), seminars and lab meetings, social media, meetings with stakeholders, etc.
- This section could be structured as a table (e.g. one for expected publications and one for conferences).

Example sentences – 2.2.1.

“I will target multidisciplinary journals, such as ○ (IF: ○), and specialized journals such as ○. (IF: ○).”

“I will present the results at highly selective international conferences and meetings, including: (1) ○ Meeting 2026 (pending dates), a widely recognized venue for scientific exchange across broad marine-science disciplines, and the perfect setting to bring together scientists, policy makers and other stakeholders (>5,000 attendees in 2022); (2) ...”

“Results will be disseminated through seminars and guest lectures in Japan, the US and Germany (e.g. ○ runs regular seminars and will host a Symposium on ○, expected in month 32).”

“I use Bluesky (@○) to communicate research output to scientists and maintain a personal website (○), which I will regularly update with project progress and output.”

“I will also participate at the ○ Graduate Symposium, and present the main results of the project in seminars and lab meetings at ○. Dissemination of the project results to policy makers and regulatory authorities responsible for natural resources management and protection in ○ will be also made via scientific presentations and regular meetings with experts and working groups.”

2.2.2. Communication activities and public engagement strategies

- Describe the intended communication activities and their target audiences (e.g. high school students, undergraduates, graduate students, academics, and the general public).
- Refer to public outreach initiatives (e.g. European Researchers' Night, Researchers in Schools, Nerd Nite, open days at the host institution, and science fairs), visits to academic institutions, social media, etc.
- Online presence is expected for most projects.
- Engagement with the local community and stakeholders is very important if this is relevant for the project.
- Provide detailed information, e.g. size and age ranges of targeted groups, outreach projects (name, objectives), etc.
- Refer to potential support received from institutional outreach/public engagement departments.
- Refer to the potential use of EU communication tools (e.g. CORDIS Wire and Horizon Magazine).

Example sentences – 2.2.2.

"I will work with the press offices at ○ to ensure that press releases are produced for publications, since these often lead to coverage in the media, as in my previous work."

"I will participate in ○ and ○ during the incoming phase, global events for research communication to the general public."

"I will work with the public relations division (which runs 120+ events per year) to host public talks on ○, filling a gap in ○'s outreach programme. I will also run hands-on oceanography activities for ○'s annual Science Festival (attracting >1000 attendees)."

2.2.3. Exploitation of the results and intellectual property rights

- Describe how the project outcomes will be transferred to stakeholders.
- Refer to potential support received from institutional knowledge transfer/innovation departments.
- Here you could refer to for example academia-industry partnerships, patent licensing, if relevant to your project.

Example sentences – 2.2.2.

"I will leverage the Transfer Office at ○ to use research outcomes to directly support marine biodiversity policymakers/stakeholders, informing policy briefings/high-level reports on lessons learned from ○ (e.g. IPCC AR7 WG2 in 2028)"

"Project outcomes will not be commercialised, and all research data will be made available under a CC-BY 4.0 license. I therefore do not foresee any intellectual property conflicts."

"The project outcomes that could be of interest for the non-academic sector will be protected through licensing. The intellectual property will be managed by the ○ Deputy Vice-Presidency for Knowledge Transfer Office, in accordance with the institutional regulations of ○ Office of Innovation and Commercialization. The parties, in compliance with the Guide to Intellectual Property Management in HE, will sign an agreement specifying the ownership and the protection and exploitation strategy for the research results."

2.3. The magnitude and importance of the project's contribution to the expected scientific, societal and economic impacts (c. 1 page)

- Address expected scientific impacts (e.g. expected publications, significance to the field, etc.).
- Address expected societal impacts, specifically referring to relevant policy documents (e.g. EU policy priorities, EU Action Plans, Global Challenges, EU Missions, UN SDGs, MSCA Green Charter, etc.)
- Address expected economic/technological impacts (quantify the economic benefits if possible).
- You could split this section into two or three subsections if appropriate.

Example sentences – 2.3.

“○ will directly contribute with at least 3 publications towards provide valuable insights into the pelagic food web dynamics and applied science for ecosystem management.”

“The project will contribute to the global challenge ○ by achieving the EU Mission ○ and the UN SDG ○.”

“The obtained knowledge of ○ will immediately benefit the implementation of ○ and, indirectly, will decrease the monitoring and assessment costs that this entails (○), providing benefits to the EU economy.”

“Output from WP○ will be useful for identifying candidate sites for sampling, reducing costs and supporting conservation management efforts.”

Criterion 3 – Quality and Efficiency of the Implementation (Weight: 20%, c. 1.5 pages)

3.1. *Quality and effectiveness of the work plan, assessment of risks and appropriateness of the effort assigned to WPs* (c. 1 page)

- Describe the time duration of your project in terms of WPs and tasks.
- List WPs, deliverables, and milestones. You can use a figure to illustrate the workflow of your project (WPs, tasks...).
- The following deliverables are currently mandatory and should be acknowledged in the proposal (e.g. within the Gantt chart):
 - Career Development Plan (CDP)
 - Data Management Plan (DMP)
 - Dissemination & Exploitation Plan
 - Mid-term report for GF
 - Final report
- The following additional deliverables could be mentioned if relevant (this list is not exhaustive - if there are other relevant deliverables for your project, mention them as well):
 - Publications
 - Other reports
 - Websites
 - Products
 - Datasets
 - Software
- The project will ultimately be evaluated on the deliverables which, for most projects, will primarily take the form of academic publications. Be as specific as is reasonably possible about these deliverables, bearing in mind that you will have to report on them in real time and will eventually have to file a report on the project outcomes.
- Include a Gantt chart with WPs, tasks, deliverables, and milestones as a figure or table.
- Describe the effectiveness and appropriateness of the effort assigned to WPs.
- Explain who will be involved in project management.
- Describe risk management: identify potential risks (administrative and scientific) and assign a probability and severity. Explain mitigation measures and contingency plans. You can use a table to represent this information.
- Explain the available institutional project management support.

Example risk assessment table:

| WP | Hazard | Impact | Risk | Mitigation | Contingency |
|-----|-----------|--------|------|-------------------------------|----------------------|
| 1 | Data loss | High | Low | Frequent external data backup | Retrieve data backup |
| ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... |

Example sentences – 3.1.

“Progress will be monitored in conjunction with supervisors through regular biweekly meetings, and formal quarterly reports to all collaborators.”

“The successful implementation of this project will be ensured by an efficient coordination between the parts and an organized administration at scientific, financial, transfer of knowledge and communication levels. The project will be subjected to: i) administration and financial control; ii) work progress monitoring; iii) refinement and updating of work-plan (if necessary); and iv) production of progress and final reports to the EC.”

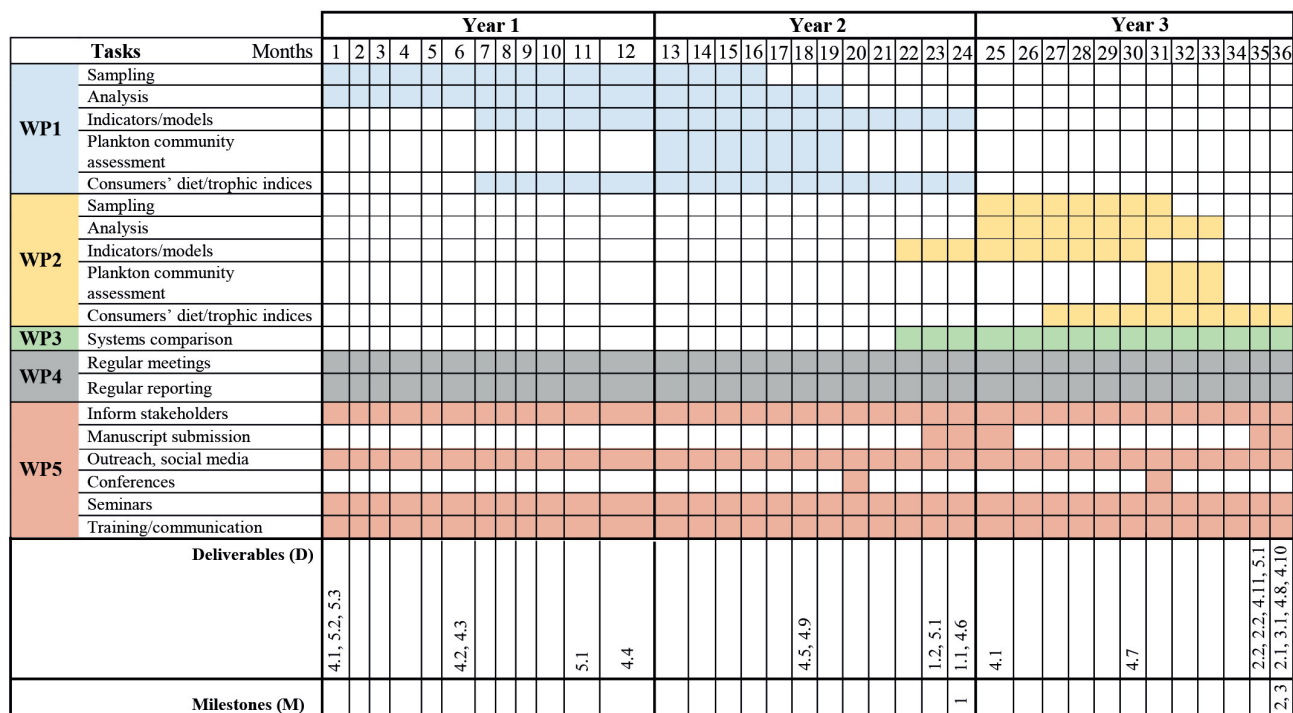


Figure 1: Example of a Gantt chart.

3.2. Quality and capacity of the host institutions and participating organisations, including hosting arrangements (c. 0.5 pages)

- Rank participant institutions within your field of study in relation to their scientific production, teaching experience, etc. Mention whether they received recognitions for excellence.
- Describe the group/department within which you will be integrated. Mention their previous experience in assisting awardees of EC grants (if relevant).
- Refer to potential support received from institutional offices for hosting arrangements.

Example sentences – 3.2.

“○ provides all technological and human resources required to execute this project to an exceptional standard, including housing assistance, insurance, and visa support.”

“○ is a high-impact university in the US, considered a global leader in earth and environmental sciences, consistently ranked among the top 15 research universities internationally in the field.”

“I will receive management support from the Unit of International Projects at ○, which have wide experience on assisting awardees of EC grants (○).”

“○ occupies a large open office space, encouraging collaboration between researchers with weekly meetings and unit retreats, and maintains a strong national and international network of collaborators.”

About the authors

Rita García-Seoane and Noam Vogt-Vincent are both postdoctoral researchers with backgrounds in biological and physical oceanography, respectively. Rita graduated in Biology from the University of Santiago de Compostela in 2014, while Noam earned his degree in Earth Sciences from the University of Oxford in 2019. Both authors were awarded a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Postdoctoral Fellowship (MSCA-PF Global) under Horizon Europe, in the 2023 and 2024 calls, respectively. Their proposals involved outgoing phases at leading research institutions in the United States and Japan, and host institutions in Spain and Germany for the return phase. Their successful applications were submitted to the Environmental and Geosciences (ENV) review panel.

Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to the following MSCA Postdoctoral Fellows, who reviewed our draft guide and contributed valuable insight, comments and suggestions: María Jesús González Rellán, Mateo Seoane Blanco, Or Bialik, and Teresa Boquete Seoane. We would also like to thank our project supervisors, host institutions, and NCPs who supported us with our own proposal development.

Last updated: 11-05-2025

Version: 1.0

If you have any suggestions or comments that you would like us to consider in future revisions of this guide, feel free to contact us!