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Considering to apply for a MSCA Postdoctoral Fellowship? Here is my successful experience and some tips!

Hi! My name is Nicolás Asensio-Jiménez. I am a postdoctoral researcher at the *Instituto de Estudos de Literatura e Tradição* at the NOVA University of Lisbon thanks to a Marie Skłodowska-Curie fellowship of the European Commission. I have a PhD in Spanish literature and I work mainly in the area of traditional literature and more specifically the hispanic ballads called *romances*. The project that I am developing together with my supervisor in the framework of the MSCA fellowship is called “The Golden Age of the *Romancero*: Echoes of Traditional Ballads in Medieval and Early Modern Spanish Literature”. If you would like to know more about this project, I invite you to consult [CORDIS](#) or the [IELT website](#).



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traditional literature in one of the best institutions in the world with direct contact with leading experts in the field. I believe that both aspects are important and should be taken into account when drawing up the proposal. Unlike other European Commission calls, the MSCA fellowship is not only a research grant, but also a training grant. You have to present a solid and original research project, but this would be nothing if you do not make clear how the scholarship will personally impact on your development as a researcher: what you will learn from the project, from the host institution, from the different research groups and your supervisor, what new skills you will develop, what new knowledge you will acquire. **The idea that must be underlined in your proposal is that the MSCA fellowship is a crucial opportunity for the development of the project and your own career.** And, believe me, it really is!

I like to think that the MSCA proposal I prepared with so much effort in the summer of 2020 is one of my best works as an academic. It is not only ten pages full of information about the project, my career, the host institution and my supervisor, but also a persuasive work. Those ten pages must work even better than a research paper. They must be convincing and well structured. The arguments, the information and the data have to be millimetrically calculated, planning where and when must appear. **The idea is not only to keep the reviewers attention but also to move, surprise and impact them!** I like to think of MSCA proposal as a work of engineering in which every detail makes sense in the exact place where it appears. One piece of information must lead to another, complementing each other, without repeating itself. And, ultimately, you are leading the evaluator to your ground, convincing her/him/hir that both your project and yourself are valuable and deserve to be funded.

Think about it for a moment. **Each MSCA fellowship is funded with almost €150,000 from the European Commission.** That means that each of the 10 pages of the part B of the proposal is worth €15,000 or, in other words, each of the 100 paragraphs in which part B is usually structured is worth €1,500. Keep this in mind when you write your proposal. **It may be the best paid paragraph in your academic life!** So make it perfect and worthy of that amount of money. Make it totally indispensable, make it effective, clear and engaging, make every single word the best!

It takes time and effort to develop a good proposal. In my case, the whole process took



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combining reading and brainstorming with my daily work. The last month was an authentic writing retreat.

In particular, during May and June, I spent a lot of time getting well informed about the MSCA fellowship. I read the [guide for applicants](#), the [manual for evaluators](#) and the [survivor's guide](#). I also read several successful proposals that I found in [Academia.edu](#) and [ResearchGate](#). At the same time I was thinking about possible research projects, I decided which would be the host university and my supervisor, and I made the first institutional contacts: that is contacting the supervisor and, in my specific case, managing the permissions to the files that were necessary for the project.

For the first two weeks of July I was still thinking about the project, creating a kind of mental map. I used to note down ideas in a Word document and even write some paragraphs that could be useful later. The next two weeks I went on holiday. I spent most of the time in the Pyrenees hiking and camping, which is what I like to do in the summer. I must admit that this decision was important. Despite the fact that I was disconnected from the world in the middle of nature, the ideas were still flowing and several strong points of the proposal emerged precisely in this time. But, above all, these two weeks had an even more important function: I came back full of strength, ready to face the hardest phase, that is, the writing of the proposal.

For this phase I reserved the whole month of August. During those four weeks I worked intensively on the proposal. I spent between 8 to 10 hours a day writing. This does not mean that I was literally putting words in a Word document all the time, but I was in front of the computer thinking about each paragraph, the general structure, where to fit the ideas and of course writing and rewriting. This time reminded me a lot of the end of the thesis because of the level of concentration, the hours of intensive effort and the frustration you may feel many days for not achieving as much progress as you expected. But even the moments of discouragement and procrastination make sense within the process and are necessary for the subsequent moments of creativity, energy and, in short, for everything to move forward.

On the 31st of August I sent the first draft of the proposal to my supervisor . I spent the first week of September re-reading, revising and rewriting some parts of the proposal, taking into account the suggestions of the supervisor . On the 8th of September one



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are always in time, but by doing the first submission in advance you make sure that your proposal will be evaluated. The 9th of September was, for me, a day of relaxation and celebration. To accomplish the proposal in time is something to be proud of and must be celebrated!

Let's move now to the practical tips!

My first advice for writing a good proposal is to **do a deep research on the MSCA fellowships**. You have to know absolutely everything! You have to read the guide for applicants, the guide for evaluators and the survivors guide. You have to attend informative events and also search into [Youtube](#) for other complementary sessions. And definitely try to read the proposals of other researchers. On the internet you can find several successful MSCA proposals with evaluation reports. Even if they are not of your field, they are useful to study how to structure the information and maybe some ideas can be reused in your own proposal. If you know someone who has obtained a MSCA fellowship, you can ask that person for the report. The faculty probably can send you successful proposals of past researchers who have agreed to share them with future candidates.

My second advice is to **show knowledge and passion**. On the one hand, you should describe your project in detail, showing that you are an expert in the field, but at the same time it must be written in a way understandable to evaluators from different disciplines. You must state why it is important and urgent to do the project, why it is a novelty and what advances it will bring in the field. On the other hand, you should also convey that you have been well informed about the host institution and that you have chosen it because it is the best for the project and your research career. Describe the team of researchers you are going to join, explain which are the main lines of research, what other ongoing projects are, what activities they usually do and, the most important: how this environment will influence your training as a researcher and what will be your contribution in return (remember that transfer of knowledge must be bidirectional). Also check if there are other research groups in the faculty with whom you could collaborate to extend your network. Talk about the training courses offered



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My third advice is to **familiarize yourself with the MSCA 's own vocabulary and use it in your proposal**. MSCA fellowships have a very long history, so they have developed their own language. You should be familiar with terms such as “Experienced Researcher”, “Supervisor”, “MSCA Ambassador”, “Career Development Plan”, “Data Management Plan”, “Open Science”. You should also be aware of the platforms promoted by the European Commission for the safeguarding of heritage and the dissemination of research results and see if they can be related to your project: [Europeana](#), [OpenAire](#), [Zenodo](#). Finally, you can gain points if you explain how your project is related to the lines of action of the different research and development programmes of the European Commission, such as [Horizon Europe](#), [Next Generation](#), [European Charter for Researchers](#) or the [Strategic Framework for the EU's cultural policy](#).

For example, in section “1.3. Quality of the supervision and of the integration in the team/institution”, I mentioned the European Charter for Researchers and its application at the NOVA University of Lisbon:

It should also be noted that NOVA supports the European Charter for Researchers. It is therefore committed to providing the best conditions for researchers to carry out their work, including a stimulating and safe environment, intellectual freedom, continuous training, supervision and a fair salary with social security coverage.

My fourth and last advice is to **fill all the sections of the proposal template**. Any absence will be immediately noticed by the evaluators and will probably be regarded negatively. Not all sections have to be the same length. In fact, there are several formulas regarding the distribution of the three main sections (excellence, impact, implementation) per pages that can work: 6+2+2, 5+3+2, 4+4+2. But the three main sections and their subsections should be filled without repeating information. The best is to calculate where the ideas you want to present can fit in, as if it were a puzzle that finally gives a complete overview. Moreover, even if a priori there are no evident interdisciplinary or gender aspects in your project, make an effort to find something (there surely is!) and detail it at least in three or four lines.

Finally, I would like to wish you very good luck. I hope that you will be writing a post like this one next year encouraging other candidates to apply for the MSCA fellowship!



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attempt. So the more you try, the better your chances are! Remember that not everything depends on you. A lot of factors come into play in any competitive process: finding the right evaluator, the number and quality of other proposals, and of course luck. The point is to do our part as well as we can and let the other factors play their part. Applying for the MSCA fellowship and writing a competitive proposal is in itself an achievement and says a lot of good things about you and your quality as a researcher. So, I wish you the best of luck and good work during the nexts months.

You can make it!



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