

A guide to the MSCA DN funding scheme

The Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions – Doctoral Networks (MSCA DN) provides doctoral candidates with the opportunity to acquire new skills and knowledge, and expand their network. At the same time, MSCA Doctoral Networks improve the quality of doctoral training and R&I capacity of the participating organisations, as well as their interdisciplinary and inter-sectoral cooperation. The objective of MSCA DN is to support doctoral programs carried out by a consortium composed of members from the academic and non-academic sectors. If you are considering applying to this funding scheme – it is essential to first understand the purpose, unique characteristics and evaluation criteria, to ensure that your application correctly fits the requirements and expectations of this grant. To help in the process, we've put together the article below. Keep reading to learn more about the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Action (MSCA) – Doctoral Networks (DN).

The purpose of the MSCA DN

Before diving deep into the structure of this funding scheme, let's first firmly grasp its overall aims. Officially, the purpose of the MSCA Doctoral Networks (DN) is to:

- Train a new generation of creative, entrepreneurial and innovative researchers, able to face current and future challenges and to convert knowledge and ideas into products and services for economic and social benefits;

- Support excellent science and strengthen the research and doctoral training capacity, going beyond the traditional academic research training setting, incorporating the elements of Open Science and equipping researchers with the right combination of research-related and transferable competencies;
- Provide enhanced career perspectives in both the academic and non-academic sectors through international, interdisciplinary and inter-sectoral mobility combined with an innovation-oriented mindset.

The MSCA DN scheme has three modalities:

- 1. Doctoral Networks (DN)** – This modality aims at achieving the objectives of the MSCA DN funding scheme. Namely, it seeks to promote international, interdisciplinary and inter-sectoral collaboration in doctoral training, as well as to train excellent doctoral candidates to increase creativity and innovation in Europe and beyond.
- 2. Industrial Doctorate (DN-ID)** – In this modality, in addition to the core components of MSCA DN, doctoral candidates are jointly supervised by academic and non-academic organisations. It is important to note that one of these organisations must be entitled to award a doctoral degree. Through the involvement of both sectors in the training process, excellent researchers can acquire skills and competencies that better fit the needs of the public and private sectors. Of course, projects of this type should still comply with all the unique features of MSCA DN, as mentioned further below. Doctoral candidates participating in this program must spend at least 50% of their time in the non-academic sector.
- 3. Joint Doctorate (DN-JD)** – Alongside meeting all the objectives of MSCA DN, this modality aims at delivering joint, double or multiple doctoral degrees. Doctoral candidates under this type will be awarded

a joint (single diploma issued by at least two officially recognized higher education institutions) or a double/multiple (two or more separate national diplomas issued by two or more officially recognized higher education institutions) PhD degrees. At least two of the beneficiaries entitled to award a PhD degree must be in EU MS/AC.

It is important to bear in mind that while the first modality, Doctoral Networks, is a perfectly good choice for your MSCA DN project, participating organisations are highly encouraged to promote industrial and joint doctorates.

The components of the MSCA Doctoral Networks (DN)

Having acquired a better understanding of the purpose of the MSCA DN funding scheme, let's review the project's structure and key components to be included for the purpose of successfully achieving MSCA DN goals. In this context, a highly competitive MSCA DN proposal should involve the following elements:

- Novel research and transferable skills and competencies;
- Enhanced networking and communication;
- Transfer of knowledge between sectors and disciplines;
- Integration of training and research activities between participating organisations;

- Secondments (short-term research training in an associated partner organisation different from the host institution).

When realizing such components, it is crucial that they do not 'stand-alone' as isolated parts. Instead, a competitive proposal should demonstrate how the aspects mentioned in the above list will be mutually realized through the features characterizing the MSCA DN funding scheme:

- **Ambitious research objectives:** From a scientific point of view, Doctoral Networks are bottom-up projects. This means there are no predefined priorities to the topic or disciplines addressed by the project as long as the proposal can establish that the project is of high scientific quality. As such, the proposed research should be innovative and positioned at the forefront of its respective field, in order to carry impact to the career and employability of the doctoral candidates. Taking part in a scientifically ambitious project, and hands-on experience in the state-of-the-art research in their field will make them desired future employees.
- **Individual doctoral candidates' projects:** Each doctoral candidate has their own individual project which needs to feed into the project's objectives and scientific work packages. The projects need to be illustrated in the application. It is important that the supervisors plan projects carefully, such that all projects are well embedded in the network and work packages, and that they benefit from the relevant competencies available in the network. As can be expected from a training network, some level of synergy and cooperation between projects (and doctoral candidates) is expected. Finally, the level of dependence between the projects should not be too high so as to put one individual project at risk if another project encounters difficulties.

- **“The network”**: In MSCA DN, the network consists of both beneficiaries and associated partners.
 - **Beneficiaries** are equivalent to “partners” in other Horizon Europe collaborative grants. They are legal entities that sign the grant agreement. A consortium must include at least three beneficiaries i.e., independent legal entities, representing at least three different EU Member State/Horizon Europe Associated Country and with at least one of them located in an EU Member State. As part of their responsibilities, beneficiaries recruit, supervise, host and train researchers, and directly receive funds for doing so. In order to be considered a beneficiary, an entity should host at least one doctoral candidate.
 - **Associated partners**, on the other hand, do not recruit any researchers. Rather, they provide additional research and transferable skills training and/or secondment opportunities. In order for the doctoral candidates to benefit most from the diversity and interdisciplinarity of the network, cross-network training activities, and secondments to participating organisations other than their primary host, are expected.
- **Cross-sectorial collaboration**: A crucial part in enhancing the career perspectives and employability of researchers in tomorrow’s market is understanding the link between academia and relevant non-academic sectors, and being exposed to various working and research environments. The DN is expected to involve academic and non-academic organisations such as businesses including SMEs, and other socio-economic actors from the EU and beyond. Assessing the extent and quality of the involvement of non-academic participants is part of the project evaluation.
- **High-quality transferable skill training**: Beyond the scientific point of view, and to complement the scientific topics, the training program should include various transferable skills training. This can include

workshops on scientific writing and proposal writing, IPR management, entrepreneurship and exploitation of research results, communication skills and personal development, ethics, team skills, multicultural awareness, gender issues, research integrity, etc. This, too, aims to contribute to the career perspectives and employability of the candidates.

Whether the project offers a standard doctorate (DN), industrial doctorate (DN-ID) or joint doctorate (DN-JD), all the above-mentioned features are “must-haves” for any competitive MSCA DN proposal.

Additional MSCA DN “essentials”

Alongside the above-mentioned core components, there are additional aspects that should be taken into consideration in order to meet all the MSCA DN requirements:

- Researchers supported by MSCA DN cannot already hold a PhD degree, however, they must be enrolled in a doctoral program in at least one EU Member State/Horizon Europe Associated Country. In addition, researchers are required to comply with the mobility rule, according to which they must not have resided or carried out their main activity (work, studies, etc.) in the country of the recruiting beneficiary for more than 12 months in the 36 months immediately before their recruitment date. Note that in the case of multiple recruiting beneficiaries, the mobility rule applies for the first recruiting beneficiary.
- All the beneficiaries must recruit and host at least one doctoral candidate.

- The project duration is limited to 48 months for DN and DN-ID and 60 months for DN-JD from the start date of the action set out in the Grant Agreement. The recruitment of each doctoral candidate will be supported for a minimum of 3 months and up to a maximum of 36 months for DN and DN-ID and 48 months for DN-JD.
- The maximum number of person months per network is 540 for all modalities (i.e 15 Doctoral candidates for 36 months each).
- Proposals submitted in the previous year cannot be resubmitted if the score they have received is lower than 80% . In such cases, applicants must wait for the following deadline to reapply.

Conclusion

The MSCA Doctoral Networks (DN) is a unique funding opportunity. The article above is a great resource to refer to for the purpose of successfully curating a highly competitive proposal. If you have any further questions or would like us to work with you to realize the full potential of your MSCA Doctoral Networks (DN) proposal, [do not hesitate to contact us.](#)