STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF A PROJECT PROPOSAL: ENTERING IN THE EVALUATOR MIND FOR A MORE SUCCESSFUL APPLICATION

Alessandra della Torre
Department of Public Health and Infectious Diseases
My expertise: Evaluator and Vice-Chair of MSC Life Science Panel

Pillar 1
Excellent Science
- European Research Council
- Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions
- Research Infrastructures

Pillar 2
Global Challenges and European Industrial Competitiveness
- Health
- Culture, Creativity and Inclusive Society
- Civil Security for Society
- Digital, Industry and Space
- Climate, Energy and Mobility
- Food, Bioeconomy, Natural Resources, Agriculture and Environment

Pillar 3
Innovative Europe
- European Innovation Council
- European innovation ecosystems
- European Institute of Innovation and Technology

TOP-DOWN projects

BOTTOM-UP projects

[NB: the application process for the other EU funding schemes is similar and much of the advice can be more broadly applied]
My expertise: Evaluator and Vice-Chair of MSC Life Science Panel

European Postdoctoral Fellowships are open to researchers of any nationality who wish to engage in R&I projects by either coming to Europe from any country in the world or moving within Europe.
→ Outgoing phase: 12 and 24 months

Global Postdoctoral Fellowships are open to European nationals or long-term residents who wish to engage in R&I projects with organizations outside EU Member States and Horizon Europe Associated Countries.
→ Outgoing phase: 12-24 months in a non-associated Third Country,
→ Mandatory return phase: 12-months in a host organisation based in an EU Member State or a Horizon Europe Associated Country
MSC PROGRAMME IS HIGHLY COMPETITIVE

Success rate in 2021 = 14.3% (10-16%)
Excellent. The proposal successfully addresses all relevant aspects of the criterion. Any shortcomings are minor.

Very Good. The proposal addresses the criterion very well, but a small number of shortcomings are present.

Good. The proposal addresses the criterion well, but a number of shortcomings are present.

Fair. The proposal broadly addresses the criterion, but there are significant weaknesses.

Poor. The criterion is inadequately addressed, or there are serious inherent weaknesses.

Every single small shortcoming in the proposal greatly reduces the chances of success.

Alessandra della Torre
Dept of Public Health and Infectious Diseases
My expertise: Evaluator and Vice-Chair of MSC Life Science Panel

Key figures (2014-2020)

- +65,000 Researchers, including 25,000 PhD candidates
- 37% Researchers from outside of the EU
- 6.2 billion € Under Horizon 2020
- +1,000 Doctoral programmes
- +4,500 Companies supported
- 42% Female researchers

Alessandra della Torre
Dept of Public Health and Infectious Diseases
MSC programme is the flagship Horizon EU career development support programme (2021-27 budget = 6.6 billions€)

**GOAL:** to enhance the creative and innovative potential of postdoctoral researchers (≤8 years from PhD) with new skillsets acquired through advanced training as well as international, interdisciplinary, and intersectoral mobility
MSC programme is the flagship Horizon EU career development support programme (2021-27 budget = €6.6 billions)

**GOAL:**

to enhance the creative and innovative potential of postdoctoral researchers (≤8 years from PhD) with new skillsets acquired through advanced training as well as international, interdisciplinary, and intersectoral mobility

**TIP-1**

NEVER FORGET THAT MSC FELLOWSHIPS ARE TRAINING PROJECTS, NOT (ONLY) RESEARCH PROJECT.

Need to emphasize 2-way knowledge transfer

Alessandra della Torre
Dept of Public Health and Infectious Diseases
Horizon Europe Programme
Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions

Application form
Staff Exchanges (HE MSCA SE)
Project proposal – Technical description (Part B)

Version 1.0
7 October 2021

TIP-2
STUDY AND STRICTLY FOLLOW EU PROPOSAL TEMPLATE AND THE MANUAL FOR APPLICANT
MSC PROGRAMME IS HIGHLY COMPETITIVE

- Excellent research proposal
- Excellent applicant
- Excellent two-way transfer of knowledge
- Excellent implementation
- Excellent impact
- Strong adherence to instructions to applicants

The EXCELLENCE NEEDS TO BE CONVINCINGLY SUBSTANTIATED IN EVERY PARAGRAPH OF THE PROPOSAL

- Clearly state the bases of the «excellence»

Alessandra della Torre
Dept of Public Health and Infectious Diseases
MSC PROGRAMME IS HIGHLY COMPETITIVE

- Excellent research proposal
- Excellent applicant
- Excellent two-way transfer of knowledge
- Excellent implementation
- Excellent impact
- Strong adherence to instructions to applicants

TIP-4

DON´T BE OVER-AMBITIOUS, PRESENT A CREDIBLE AND REALISTIC WORK PLAN

Alessandra della Torre
Dept of Public Health and Infectious Diseases
The evaluation process

TIP-5
EVALUATORS HAVE DIFFERENT LEVELS OF EXPERTISE IN THE RESEARCH FIELD.

Need to provide ALL relevant information in a clear and straightforward manner

Alessandra della Torre
Dept of Public Health and Infectious Diseases
The evaluation process

TIP-6

EVALUATORS ARE USUALLY UNDER GREAT PRESSURE TO FINALISE THEIR REPORTS: HELP THEM!

✓ Be synthetic ‘less may be more’
✓ Avoid redundancies, bad layout, meaningless illustrations
✓ Use consistent wordings

Alessandra della Torre
Dept of Public Health and Infectious Diseases
The evaluation process

- TIP-7
  EVALUATORS ARE USUALLY UNDER GREAT PRESSURE TO FINALISE THEIR REPORTS: HELP THEM!

  ✓ align your objectives to EU ones
  ✓ follow the proposal structure, show them clearly what they expect to see

Alessandra della Torre
Dept of Public Health and Infectious Diseases
# Evaluation criteria

## MSCA Postdoctoral Fellowships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EXCELLENCE</th>
<th>IMPACT</th>
<th>Quality and efficiency of the implementation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>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)</td>
<td>Credibility of the measures to enhance the career perspectives and employability of the researcher and contribution to his/her skills development</td>
<td>Quality and effectiveness of the work plan, assessment of risks and appropriateness of the effort assigned to work packages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sound methodology (including links to previous works, consistent with the proposal, and other diverse research project practices)</td>
<td>Suitable measures to meet output and impact indicators and other manufacturing aspects</td>
<td>Quality and innovation in the project, translated into expected scientific, societal and economic impacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of the two-way fit degree between the researcher and the host institution</td>
<td>The expected output of the project</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality and appropriateness of the researcher’s professional experience, competences and skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

50% 30% 20%
Tips for Excellence:

MSCA Postdoctoral Fellowships

EXCELLENCE

- 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)
- 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)
- Quality of the supervision, training and of the two-way transfer of knowledge between the researcher and the host
- Quality and appropriateness of the researcher's professional experience, competences and skills

50%

- Structure, structure, structure!
- Attract the evaluator's attention by highlighting in BOLD key steps of the project, its crucial concepts and key words.
- Don't provide excessive technicalities and details which can confuse the evaluators, but try to accompany them throughout the proposal contents.
Tips for Excellence:

**MSCA Postdoctoral Fellowships**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EXCELLENCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>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)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>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)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of the supervision, training and of the two-way transfer of knowledge between the researcher and the host</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality and appropriateness of the researcher's professional experience, competences and skills</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Be balanced between describing the current state-of-the-art and your project
- Be balanced between too technical details and basic explanations
- Highlight interdisciplinarity. Explain how expertise and methods from different disciplines will be brought together and integrated in pursuit of your objectives.
Tips for Excellence:

**MSCA Postdoctoral Fellowships**

EXCELLENCE

- 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)
- 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)
- Quality of the supervision, training, and of the two-way transfer of knowledge between the researcher and the host
- Quality and appropriateness of the researcher’s professional experience, competences and skills

- Define the overall goal and decline it into more specific/operational objectives

- Objectives need to be SMART:
  - Specific
  - Measurable
  - Achievable
  - Relevant
  - Time-bound

Substantiate each of the these!!
Alessandra della Torre
Dept of Public Health and Infectious Diseases

Tips for Excellence:

MSCA Postdoctoral Fellowships

**EXCELLENCE**

- 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)

- 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)

- Quality of the supervision, training and of the two-way transfer of knowledge between the researcher and the host

- Quality and appropriateness of the researcher's professional experience, competences and skills

- **Carefully choose the host group.**
- **Highlight complementarity between applicant and host and how these fit with project goal and implementation.**
- **Demonstrate excellence of host group/institutions, even if top ones!**
- **Write CV highlighting aspects relevant for the proposal. These should be complementary to the CV.**

50%
Tips for IMPACT:

MSCA Postdoctoral Fellowships

- Explain how the project will decisively advance your scientific career

- Show what benefits your project can bring to the scientific and not-scientific communities, and describe a well-planned dissemination and outreach strategy. Don’t be too general. Provide examples.

IMPACT

Credibility of the measures to enhance the career perspectives and employability of the researcher and contribution to his/her skills development

Suitability and quality of the measures to maximise expected outcomes and impacts, as set out in the dissemination and exploitation plan, including communication activities

The magnitude and importance of the project’s contribution to the expected scientific, societal and economic impacts

30%
Tips for IMPACT:

MSCA Postdoctoral Fellowships

**IMPACT**

- Credibility of the measures to enhance the career perspectives and employability of the researcher and contribution to his/her skills development.
- Suitability and quality of the measures to maximise expected outcomes and impacts, as set out in the dissemination and exploitation plan, including communication activities.
- The magnitude and importance of the project’s contribution to the expected scientific, societal and economic impacts.

✓ Highlight relevance to the challenges identified in Horizon Europe, EU missions, and UE Sustainable Development Goals.
Tips for IMPLEMENTATION:

MSCA Postdoctoral Fellowships

- Be consistent with research objectives/work packages.
- Provide a convincing work plan for your project. Include realistic and convincing MILESTONES and DELIVERABLES.
- Describe SWOPs and risks and provide contingency plans.
Max 10 pages between the 3 sections

Align the section lengths to the weighting of evaluation criteria

“Excellence” (weight 50%)  MAX 6 pages!

“Impact” (30%)

“Quality and Efficiency of the Implementation” (20%)
Get as much feedbacks as possible

- By supervisors and close colleagues
- By “test-readers” out of the research field
- By MSC grantees

But be a selective listener

If your proposal is not selected for funding, take advantage of reviewer’s comments (ESR), and if possible address the criticisms and resubmit!
Ten simple rules for a successful EU Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions Postdoctoral (MSCA) fellowship application

Philipp Baumert, *, Francesco Cenni, Mikhail L. Antonkine

1 Exercise Biology Group, Faculty of Sport and Health Sciences, Technical University of Munich, Munich, Germany, 2 Faculty of Sport and Health Sciences, University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland, 3 Unit of Health Research and Biotechnology, Bavarian Research Alliance GmbH, Munich & Nuremberg, Germany
Alessandra della Torre
Sapienza Università di Roma
Dipartimento di Sanità Pubblica e Malattie Infettive
Piazzale Aldo Moro, 5

alessandra.dellatorre@uniroma1.it
Tel. 0039 06 4969 4268