MSCA COFUND – Doctoral Programs

Examples of STRENGTHS and WEAKNESSES - 2021 call

Criterion 1 (Doctoral) – Excellence

- Quality and novelty of the selection / recruitment process for the researchers (transparency, composition and organisation of selection committees, evaluation criteria, equal opportunities, the gender dimension and other diversity aspects) and quality and attractiveness of the appointment conditions, including competitiveness of the salary for the standards of the hosting countries.
- Quality and novelty of the research options offered by the programme in terms of science, interdisciplinarity, intersectorality and level of international mobility. Quality and appropriateness of open science practices.
- Quality, novelty and pertinence of the research training programme (including transferable skills, inter/multidisciplinary, intersectoral and gender as well as other diversity aspects).
- Quality, novelty and pertinence of the supervision, career guidance and career development arrangements.

**STRENGTHS FROM EVALUATION SUMMARY REPORTS**

- The planning for the dissemination of the calls will credibly be very effective, e.g., adverts will be placed in social media, at conferences, on institutional websites, through leading international journals and on Euraxess.
- The recruitment process is very well defined. The eligibility criteria and application requirements are transparent. Selection criteria are appropriately based on the Open, Transparent and Merit-based Recruitment of Researchers (OTM-R) recommendations and are clearly articulated in the proposal with a relevant and defined scoring system.
- The composition and organisation of selection committees is overall excellent and guarantees the fairness of the selection procedure, e.g., will involve a minimum of three independent external international experts.
- The programme pays appropriate attention to equal opportunity and diversity issues in alignment with the EU Charter and Code.
- Salary, benefits and working conditions offered to the doctoral candidates are very good. The applicant organisation provides attractive appointment conditions by offering doctoral candidates a fixed-term contract with social security provisions in alignment with national legislation.
- The research programme is outstanding in terms of interdisciplinary research options and intersectorality, and it has an extensive network of international collaborators to appropriately support the internal mobility programme.
- Appropriately emphasises Open Science practices and the FAIR data principles. Doctoral candidates will prepare a data management plan within the first six months as part of their Career Development Plans.
- The proposal convincingly includes a well-structured, balanced and comprehensive academic educational programme with diverse measures for scientific training.
- The role of the non-academic sector in the training programme is robust and will include activities relevant to the doctoral candidates.
- The training on research skills within the appropriate disciplines and on gaining new skills is of high-quality, emphasising open science, gender equity, diversity and inclusion.
- The programme will start with an initial six-month training period which includes career development plans and research group integration, as well as training in a range of cross-disciplinary areas.
- Supervision arrangements are well-defined. All supervisors will have extensive experience leading internationally competitive research projects and will also receive special training in supervision.
- The progress of the doctoral candidates will be appropriately and closely monitored through regular updates of the individual Career Development Plans.
- The proposal successfully demonstrates clear, relevant and efficient arrangements for career development, i.e., through Individual Mentoring Programme, Alumni Network, Career Talks & Workshops and Professional Networking Opportunities.
- Has specific measures in place to support and foster career development of under-represented groups and women, for example, by participating in the Science by Women programme.

**WEAKNESSES FROM EVALUATION SUMMARY REPORTS**

- The gender dimension is addressed in a generic manner. Moreover, specific actions are insufficiently provided to ensure diversity issues are taken into account during the selection and recruitment process.
- Training on the gender dimension and/or other diversity aspects are insufficiently considered.
- The proposal follows the goal that the doctoral students will do secondments of one month duration in the industry. For some researchers and their projects, such duration runs a risk of being insufficient to complete and acquire the necessary knowledge through intersectoral exposure.
- International mobility approaches and how it will be implemented at the different host institutions are not comprehensively explained.
- International mobility is not sufficiently developed in the proposal; For example, it is not fully clear if international mobility during the PhD period is a requirement.
- The overly complex structure envisaged for supervision raises concern for the feasibility of effective supervision of the large number of proposed doctoral candidates.
- The eligibility criteria and the evaluation criteria are not appropriately justified. For example, the meaning and content of the “written exam” in the application file is unclear, and the criterion of the two laboratories involved or the gender criteria in case of a tie in the selection process are insufficiently described.
- The organisation of work and interconnectivity of the different committees, the jury and the independent reviewers is not sufficiently described. The terms of locating and assigning independent reviewers and their role are not adequately described.
- The organisation of the selection process is vaguely presented. For example, the procedure related to the selection of the scientific projects is not convincingly described and it is not sufficiently clear who will give the supervising team's scientific justification.
- The redress/appeal procedure is not sufficiently explained. The proposal lacks clear and sufficient details on whether some external and/or independent members participate in the redress committee if queries or conflicts arise for some applications.
- The information regarding the financial elements of the programme lack consistency, e.g. research costs vs laboratory and facilities cost, number of fellow months, total EU contribution.
- The language of the training program is unclear, which may raise some issues for overseas/multicultural researchers.
- The qualifications and supervision experience of supervisors are not sufficiently justified. Supervision training, the maximum number of concurrent thesis supervisions and other arrangements of quality assurance are not adequately provided.

**Criterion 2 (Doctoral)— Impact**
• Strengthening human resources good practices at institutional, regional, national or international level, in particular through aligning the practices of participating organisations with the principles set out by the EU for human resources development in research and innovation.
• Credibility of the proposed measures to enhance the career perspectives and employability of researchers and contribution to their 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.

**STRENGTHS FROM EVALUATION SUMMARY REPORTS**

- The proposal clearly defines the measures to align the practices to the EU for human resources development in R&I. The programme will convincingly provide an excellent working environment, promote interdisciplinary education and research, create opportunities for international networking, offer transferable skills training, and ensure equal opportunities for the doctoral candidates.
- The integration of the proposed research programme with regional and national strategic research lines and training networks is well demonstrated, for example, by strengthening the relationship between top research centres and non-academic sectors through attracting and training of researchers for academic and industrial research positions.
- The international features of the programme are well defined and will be developed through different means including secondments, workshops, collaborative networks with international partners. The engagement of doctoral candidates is clearly highlighted.
- The project defines appropriate KPIs for measuring the impact on HR processes, for example, quality of recruited fellows, number of attended training courses, number, quality and impact of scientific publications, etc.
- The proposed training programme will empower the doctoral candidates with excellent scientific competences and a diverse set of career-focused transferable skills that will positively impact their future careers in both academia and the private sector.
- Participation in the Alumni Network will credibly help the fellows to extend the impact of the programme on their careers beyond the duration of the fellowship.
- The proposed measures to maximise the expected outcomes are clear and relevant.
- The Communication and Dissemination Plan is convincingly effective with activities addressing different target audiences and includes very well-defined channels and KPIs, for example, at least 3 publications by each fellow during the PhD with at least one first author publication in a high-impact journal; participation in at least one international conference/workshop per year, the annual institution Day, Alumni careers event, etc.
- The project also has an established management protocol and strategy for intellectual property and commercialisation aspects of the research results that will be ensured by an experienced in-house knowledge transfer team in collaboration with the other partner organisations

**WEAKNESSES FROM EVALUATION SUMMARY REPORTS**

- The outlined dissemination and communication activities are not appropriately described and justified with dedicated Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). Specifically, audiences that will be targeted or dedicated outreach activities are not precisely presented and specific actions are not always
- Publication targets in peer-reviewed journals (4 papers and 160 programme wide) are over ambitious for the size of the programme and also for the intersectoral goals of the programme. It is not adequately elaborated if sufficient support will be offered for a credible outcome of 4 high-quality research publications for each PhD candidate. Additionally it is not clearly specified how the authorship will be shared among the PhD candidate and the three proposed supervisors.
- The IPR strategy not sufficiently elaborated, particularly with respect to the goal for such a wide range of intersectoral activities and the high publication targets.
- Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) issues are not described in detail and concrete actions to be implemented both during and after the end of the project are not clearly identified.
- The proposed strategy for the dissemination, exploitation and communication activities (including public engagement) lacks a convincing justification

**Criterion 3 (Doctoral) – Implementation**

- Quality and effectiveness of the work plan, management structures, assessment of risks and appropriateness of the effort assigned to work packages.
- Quality and capacity of the host institution(s) and participating organisations (where appropriate), including hosting arrangements and extent to which they bring together the necessary expertise to successfully implement the research training programme.

**STRENGTHS FROM EVALUATION SUMMARY REPORTS**

- The proposed work plan is credible and the defined deliverables and milestones are fully aligned with the proposed training programme.
- The project has a well-defined management structure with clear and logical split of roles and responsibilities which will convincingly be effective to implement the programme.
- The Gantt chart provides a clear overview of the evaluation timeline and reflects all major deliverables and milestones. The project proposes to start its activities six months prior to its official launch.
- The risk mitigation strategy is very well considered and numerous risks that may arise at the managerial and/or the research level are appropriately defined and relevant mitigation measures are identified.
- The applicant and 14 associated partner organisations have a strong record and have convincingly developed relevant competences.
- The participating organisations have appropriate infrastructure, experience and capacity to train and host the doctoral candidates.
- The support offered to the doctoral candidates by the host and participating organisations covers a variety of different aspects, e.g., disseminating and communicating results, the social aspects, etc.

**WEAKNESSES FROM EVALUATION SUMMARY REPORTS**

- The list of deliverables is insufficiently presented, lacking information on the level of dissemination.
- The complementarity among the participating institutions is not convincingly demonstrated.
- How complementarities with associated partners will be ensured throughout the programme is not adequately elaborated in the proposal.
- The work plan is not well elaborated. The description of work packages lacks clarity on the implementation of the activities. The Gantt chart provided does not depict correctly the planned activities and includes inconsistencies in the timeline (e.g., start/end dates of recruitment).
- Deliverables and milestones are not well developed. For example, the list of deliverables does not match those in the WP description nor the due dates reported (e.g. D1.2 and D6.2 are missing from the list), and some of them are scheduled beyond the work package timeline (e.g. D3.1 for WP3). The list of milestones does not sufficiently include all the control points of the project; for example, the publication of the calls is not clearly stated.
MSCA COFUND – **Postdoctoral Programs**

*Examples of STRENGTHS and WEAKNESSES - 2021 call*

## Criterion 1 (Postdoctoral) – **Excellence**

- Quality and novelty of the selection / recruitment process for the researchers (transparency, composition and organisation of selection committees, evaluation criteria, equal opportunities, the gender dimension and other diversity aspects) and quality and attractiveness of the appointment conditions, including competitiveness of the salary for the standards of the hosting countries.
- Quality and novelty of the research options offered by the programme in terms of science, interdisciplinarity, intersectorality and level of international mobility. Quality and appropriateness of open science practices.
- Quality, novelty and pertinence of the research training programme (including transferable skills, inter/multidisciplinary, intersectoral and gender as well as other diversity aspects).
- Quality, novelty and pertinence of the supervision, career guidance and career development arrangements.

### STRENGTHS FROM EVALUATION SUMMARY REPORTS

- The programme will strongly benefit from an extensive and highly visible communication strategy using a large set of media channels to reach the target audiences and raise awareness about the programme. The inclusion of a launch event is a strong feature.
- The call dissemination strategy is resourceful, using various means and media, and well-structured.
- Information provided to potential applicants is coherent.
- The proposal relevantly displays a comprehensive equal opportunities policy at the benefit of the researchers with specific needs.
- Gender dimension aspects are presented in detail and will be regarded at all phases of application and selection, which is positive.
- The programme offers two levels of fellowships depending on the researchers’ seniority which is an excellent feature allowing for a fairer selection process.
- The evaluation criteria pertaining to each aspect of the application are relevant and very well addressed.
- A good redress mechanism is envisaged for applicants dissatisfied with aspects of the selection process.
- The remote evaluation phase is very well addressed and a consensus meeting of the evaluators adequately ranks the proposals.
- The experts will be appropriately trained and informed and will be subject to relevant confidentiality measures and a comprehensive nonconflict of interest policy.
- The appointment conditions are highly attractive and appropriate working conditions are also clearly articulated both at the beneficiary and at the secondment organisations level.
- The proposal clearly formulates that the research projects will be offered in a number of cutting-edge research and technology areas of high industrial relevance.
- The proposal demonstrates very good measures taken to appropriately meet all the expectations of interdisciplinarity, intersectorality and international mobility.
- A non academic secondment period and short visits are compulsory, this is very positive.
- The commitment of the beneficiary to operate the programme under a recognised green charter for sustainability in science is an asset of the proposal.
- There is a well-grounded and comprehensively explained strategy to fully ensure open access for publications and a controlled management for the data generated. The open science practice is therefore well-justified as being fully EU compatible.
- The strategy to be adopted to ensure Open Access is clear and line with the FAIR principles.
- A very well detailed and highly credible training programme is provided for domain-specific research training as well as for the development of transferable skills, through a number of relevant training modules and events. Non-academic stakeholders will be appropriately involved in the training offer.
- The fellows will benefit from strong supervisory arrangements as each of them will interact with a gender-balanced, multi-disciplinary and trans-sectoral supervisory team fit to cover all aspects of a sound guidance.
- The organization and the frequency of the meetings with the supervisory team is appropriate. A very good quality control of training and monitoring is guaranteed by a mandatory career development plan, developed jointly by the fellows and their supervisors and revised regularly.
- The proposal provides relevant evidence on the expertise and experience of the primary academic supervisors who will mentor the fellows.

**WEAKNESSES FROM EVALUATION SUMMARY REPORTS**

- Equal opportunities measures are not convincingly considered. The major optional situations are listed but how such cases will be managed is not addressed with enough detail.
- The eligibility criteria exclude researchers who have completed their PhD more than three years before the call's deadline without a convincing justification.
- The selection of experts and composition of the evaluation panels is very much dominated by the beneficiary and the beneficiary's staff thereby reducing the openness and transparency of the selection process. For example, experts will mainly be selected from the network of collaborators and the minimum requirement of independent experts in the evaluation panels is low. Furthermore, the decision for the selection of fellows will be taken by the Executive Group, which is only composed of internal staff.
- The selection procedure is very much dominated by the beneficiary's staff and some relevant steps of the selection process will be done without independent, international experts involved, e.g. the final selection will be done by the Selection Committee, which is composed only of internal staff. Furthermore, it is not clearly explained why adjustments of the final selection should be made at this late stage of the process. This strongly impedes the openness, fairness and transparency of the selection process.
- The set-up of the database and criteria for selection of potential experts for the evaluation are not sufficiently clear and transparent.
- The independence of evaluators is not fully assured. For example, a significant part of the experts' evaluation panel is drawn from existing beneficiary advisory committees, and the supervisors are included in the interview bodies while also being part of the Supervisory Board.
- Limited information is given on how or by whom the redress procedure is handled, and the general timeline of this part of the process.
- The evaluation criteria, scoring system and weightings are mostly clear. However, it is, for example, not entirely clear which criteria are used for evaluation during the interview phase.
- The proposal does not detail the provisions in cases in which candidates receive equal scores or experts are not able to reach a consensus.
- Scoring is not fully elaborated. For example, the final score calculation to determine the ranking list is not fully comprehensive, and how equal scores will be processed is not clear.
- Although opportunities for international, intersectoral and interdisciplinary mobility are clearly identifiable, they are not assured as the secondment is only optional.
- Although the proposal lists a number of international partners, the description of measures to support the international exposure of fellows is not sufficiently detailed.
- The supervision arrangements are not described in sufficient detail and, for example, provisions for monitoring are not elaborated.
- The monitoring mechanisms of the supervision and the supervision arrangements taken during the secondments are not explained with sufficient detail.
- The envisaged measures to ensure high quality and comprehensive training to the researchers are not sufficiently specific or explained in appropriate detail. For example, course selection and duration, quality assurance, or the training aspects of the secondments are not sufficiently elaborated.
- The open access policy of the program is not sufficiently clear or justified in the context of the project, relying mostly on the standard EU expectations.
- The high amount of the indirect costs and costs associated with the management of the programme are not well justified, especially in comparison with the low amount that will be offered for the training of fellows.

Criterion 2 (Postdoctoral) – Impact

- Strengthening human resources good practices at institutional, regional, national or international level, in particular through aligning the practices of participating organisations with the principles set out by the EU for human resources development in research and innovation.
- Credibility of the proposed measures to enhance the career perspectives and employability of researchers and contribution to their 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.

STRENGTHS FROM EVALUATION SUMMARY REPORTS

- The beneficiary and the vast majority of implementing partners hold the HR excellence in research award demonstrating their excellent commitment to aligning their practices with the principles of the Charter and the Code.
- The recruitment of postdoctoral fellows will appropriately boost the beneficiary as well as the hosting institutions in their objective to be a world class site for research in the field.
- The research to be performed is very well connected to the ecosystem of industry.
- The programme will positively contribute to further strengthening a national research priority area.
- The proposal relevantly addresses the positive impacts that the programme will have on strengthening the human resources in the targeted research area.
- The proposal provides evidence of the outstanding commitment of the beneficiary to support the programme beyond its co-funded period depending on its outputs.
- The programme provides the fellows with the opportunity to work beyond the academic environment in various disciplines and sectors which will widen their domain of expertise and their ability to cooperate with various actors which is very positive for their career enhancement.
- The proposed measures to enhance the career perspectives and employability of researchers are well developed. Good information is presented about the integration of research and training in university and industry to prepare fellows to take on leadership roles in the future.
- The supervisors are appropriately committed to broaden the network of the fellows which is a novel element in supporting the fellows career development.
- The programme will benefit from an extensive and detailed dissemination, communication and exploitation strategy that will allow to ensure an excellent coverage and impact of all the appropriate programme stakeholders.
- An wide range of channels for the dissemination of research results is presented that includes e.g. publications, conferences, webinars.
- The proposed measures for communication are comprehensive and will target a diverse range of audiences including academy, business, general public and students.
- The proposal presents a comprehensive IPR management policy that will ensure the proper administration of the fellows' outputs.
- A very good plan is articulated to introduce and monitor the potential IPR issues throughout the programme.

**WEAKNESSES FROM EVALUATION SUMMARY REPORT**
- Limited information is given in the proposal on how the fellows’ careers can be enhanced in the academic sector, for example, in the building of professional networks or acquiring teaching experience.
- Measures to enhance the career perspectives and employability of the fellows are not comprehensively demonstrated nor fully credible.
- The proposal does not provide detailed information and indicators related to the impact on strengthening research human resources at regional, national and international level.
- The exploitation plan mostly focuses on IP management and lacks additional information about other activities proposed for the exploitation of the project’s results.
- The proposal does not provide sufficient concrete evidence about how human resources will be significantly strengthened at institutional, regional, national and international level.
- Key performance indicators, qualitative analysis or measures are not sufficiently provided or discussed.

**Criterion 3 (Postdoctoral) – Implementation**

- Quality and effectiveness of the work plan, management structures, assessment of risks and appropriateness of the effort assigned to work packages.
- Quality and capacity of the host institution(s) and participating organisations (where appropriate), including hosting arrangements and extent to which they bring together the necessary expertise to successfully implement the research training programme.

**STRENGTHS FROM EVALUATION SUMMARY REPORTS**
- The work packages are well structured and encompass a relevant description of the tasks to be performed as well as their associated milestones and deliverables.
- The management structure and procedures are solid. It is an innovative and relevant feature to include supervisors and postdoctoral representatives in the supervisory board.
- The key actors in charge of the implementation of the programme are clearly identified together with their responsibilities and their time commitment.
- The proposal provides sufficient evidence of an appropriate financial management and monitoring of the programme which will ensure its effective and successful administration.
- Some major possible risks of the programme are well identified and prioritised in terms of probability and severity. The proposed risk mitigation measures will properly help to handle the possibly emerging situations.
- The beneficiary and its implementing partners provide solid evidence of their capacity to effectively conducting the project.
- The commitment of the beneficiary is shown by the level of own money it intends to inject in the programme while the letters of commitment appropriately display the engagement of the partners.
- The proposal convincingly displays the extensive expertise and experience of the administrative staff that will run the programme.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WEAKNESSES FROM EVALUATION SUMMARY REPORTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- The work plan, including the work packages, is not sufficiently described for effective implementation of a programme of such size. For example, only limited information is given on the management structures to be established, decision-making, and financial management. The individual tasks in the work packages are also only very generically described, without giving appropriate details.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The different tasks and objectives listed in the work packages are only vaguely described.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The table with major milestones is underdeveloped for a 5-year-research training programme and does not identify adequate milestones for effective management.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The risk assessment is only superficially developed and mitigation measures are only sketched.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The risk management plan is not sufficiently articulated. While considering the possible risks, their severity is not clearly declared, the mitigation measures are not always credible (e.g. postdocs not performing well), and some risk probabilities are underestimated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The risk assessment is insufficiently detailed. For example, the risk likelihood or severity are not clearly defined and the proposed contingency measures are not fully explained.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The support and integration services offered to the candidate researchers are not appropriately articulated.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>