



Horizon Europe Programme

Guide for Applicants

Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions – Co-funding of Regional, National
and International Programmes (COFUND)

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Disclaimer: This guide aims to support potential applicants to the COFUND 2023 call. It is provided for information purposes only and is not intended to replace consultation of any applicable legal sources. Neither the European Commission nor the European Research Executive Agency (or any person acting on their behalf) can be held responsible for the use made of this guidance document. Note that the guidance provided in the Annotated Model Grant Agreement shall prevail in case of discrepancies.



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History of Changes

Version	Date	Change
1.0	14/09/2022	Initial Version
1.1	26/09/2023	Updated for 2023 call
1.2	14/11/2023	Section 2.5 - Letters of Commitment updated

Note:

National Contact Points (NCPs) have been set up across Europe and beyond by the national governments to provide information and personalised support to HE applicants in their native language. The mission of the NCPs is to raise awareness, inform and advise on HE funding opportunities as well as to support potential applicants in the *preparation, submission and follow-up* of the grant applications. For details on the NCP in your country please consult [the National Contact Points page](#).

1. MSCA COFUND – A FEW DEFINITIONS

Important Note:

All main definitions (not included in this guide) are available in the [MSCA part of the Work Programme](#). Links to other official documents (e.g. [Horizon Europe General Annexes](#) of the Work Programme, [Horizon Europe Unit Model Grant Agreement](#), [Horizon Europe Programme Guide](#)) are provided in the [call page on the Funding and Tenders Portal](#).

Beneficiary is the sole signatory to the Grant Agreement, which receives the EU funding, claims costs, and takes complete responsibility for the proper implementation of the proposed programme. The beneficiary must be a legal entity established in an EU Member State or HE Associated Country that funds or manages Doctoral Programmes or Postdoctoral Programmes for researchers.

Implementing partners are legal entities receiving financial support from the beneficiary and implementing the MSCA COFUND Doctoral or Postdoctoral programme. Implementing partners can employ researchers. Implementing partners may bring financial contribution.

Associated partners are entities which participate in the action (e.g. providing training or secondments), but without the right to charge costs or claim contributions. Associated partners may not employ the researchers under the action. Associated partners may bring financial contribution.

Doctoral candidates are researchers not already in possession of a doctoral degree at the deadline of the co-funded programme's call.

Postdoctoral candidates are researchers in possession of a doctoral degree at the deadline of the co-funded programme's call.

Academic sector means public or private higher education establishments awarding academic degrees, public or private non-profit research organisations¹ and International European Research Organisations (IERO).¹

Non-academic sector means any socio-economic actor not included in the academic sector and fulfilling the requirements of the Horizon Europe (HE) Rules for Participation.²

Gender Equality Plan: Having a gender equality plan is an eligibility criterion for Public bodies, Higher education establishments and Research organisations from Member States and Associated Countries. Be aware that if the proposal is selected, having a Gender Equality Plan will be necessary before the grant agreement signature (applicable on calls with deadlines in 2022 and beyond); this requirement concerns legal entities applying as beneficiaries [Please refer to the Horizon Europe guidance on gender equality plans](#).

¹ 'International European Research Organisation' (IERO) means an international organisation, the majority of whose members are EU Member States or Horizon Europe Associated Countries, and whose principal objective is to promote scientific and technological cooperation in Europe (see Article 2(14) of the Regulation establishing Horizon Europe - the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation, laying down its rules for participation and dissemination.

² Regulation (EU) 2021/695 of 28 April 2021 (OJEU 12.05.2021, L170, p.1).

2. COFUND IN A NUTSHELL

Overview:

Programme	Doctoral	Postdoctoral
Minimum Number of Recruited Researchers	3	3
Number of beneficiaries³	1	1
Number of Associated Partners	No restrictions	No restrictions
Number of Implementing Partners	No restrictions	No restrictions
Minimum duration of each individual fellowship	3 months	3 months
Maximum duration of the training programme	60 months	60 months
Eligible researchers	Researchers must be doctoral candidates, i.e. not already in possession of a doctoral degree at the deadline of the co-funded programme's call.	Researchers must be in possession of a doctoral degree at the deadline of the co-funded programme's call.
Selection of researchers	A good balance between experts related to the beneficiary and independent experts from outside the partnership must be ensured in the pool of evaluators and in the selection committees.	A good balance between experts related to the beneficiary and independent international experts from outside the partnership (based in other countries) must be ensured in the pool of evaluators and in the selection committees.

³ COFUND Doctoral/Postdoctoral Programmes can be implemented by a sole beneficiary or in conjunction with Associated and/or Implementing partners.

Participating Organisations			
Summary of Tasks			
Role in the training programme for Doctoral and Postdoctoral	Recruitment of researchers	Training and/or Hosting of Seconded Researchers	Directly claim unit contributions
Beneficiary	✓	✓	✓
Associated Partner	<i>x</i>	✓	<i>x</i>
Implementing Partner	✓	✓	<i>x</i>

2.1. Structure of COFUND

The Co-funding of regional, national and international programmes (COFUND) programme supports existing as well as new regional, national and international programmes that aim to strengthen the international, inter-sectoral and interdisciplinary training, mobility and career development of doctoral and post-doctoral researchers spreading the best practices of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA).

Those co-funded programmes must follow MSCA's good practice in terms of international recruitment and minimum standard of employment for the recruited fellows as described in the [European Charter for Researchers and Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers](#). The impact on the enhancement of human resources in research and innovation at regional, national or international level should be demonstrated by the proposed HR practices.

Proposed programmes can cover any research disciplines ("bottom-up"), but exceptionally can also focus on specific disciplines, notably when they are based on national or regional Research and Innovation Strategies for Smart Specialisation (RIS3 strategies). Funding synergies with Cohesion policy funds and the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) are strongly encouraged⁴.

All projects are highly encouraged to address the principles of the MSCA Green Charter⁵ and implement measures to minimise the environmental footprint of their activities.

⁴ The Recovery and Resilience Facility supports reforms and investments undertaken by Member States. The aim is to mitigate the economic and social impact of the coronavirus pandemic and make European economies and societies more sustainable, resilient and better prepared for the challenges and opportunities of the green and digital transitions [Recovery and Resilience Facility | European Commission \(europa.eu\)](#)

⁵ https://ec.europa.eu/msca/green_charter. While the MSCA Green Charter is non-binding, funded projects are strongly encouraged to take into account the principles it sets out.

2.1.1. Doctoral Programmes

Doctoral Programmes supported by COFUND offer research training activities to allow doctoral candidates to develop and broaden their skills and competences. They will lead to the award of a doctoral degree in at least one EU Member State or Horizon Europe Associated Country. The training activities should be based on the [EU Principles on Innovative Doctoral Training](#).

Substantial training modules, including digital ones, addressing key transferable skills and competences common to all fields and fostering the culture of Open Science, innovation and entrepreneurship will be supported. They will include, *inter alia*, training on the use of collaborative tools, opening access to publications and to research data, FAIR data management, public engagement and citizen science.

On top of compulsory international mobility, applicants are encouraged to include elements of cross-sectoral mobility and interdisciplinarity into their programmes. Moreover, they **must provide for call(s)**, which would allow the researchers to propose their own project or to choose among research projects proposed to them. Collaboration with a wider set of partners, including from the non-academic sector, will be positively taken into account during the evaluation. These organisations may provide hosting or secondment opportunities or training modules in research or transferable skills.

Particular attention is paid to the quality of supervision⁶ and mentoring arrangements as well as career guidance.

2.1.2. Postdoctoral Programmes

Postdoctoral Programmes supported by COFUND fund individual advanced research training and career development fellowships for postdoctoral researchers. The programmes should offer training to develop key transferable skills and competences common to all fields, foster innovation and entrepreneurship and promote and (where appropriate) reward Open Science practices (open access to publications and to research data, FAIR data management, public engagement and citizen science, etc.).

On top of compulsory international mobility, applicants are encouraged to include elements of cross-sectoral mobility and interdisciplinarity into their programmes. Researchers are expected to write their own proposals and choose their host institution. **Programmes, which predefine the fellow's research work at a given location, do not conform to this principle.**

Researchers will be able to freely choose a research topic and the appropriate organisation to host them, fitting their individual needs. Typically researchers are recruited and/or seconded within the partnership mentioned in the proposal. However, with the REA project officer's prior approval, it is normally possible to add more Associated or Implementing partners during project execution.

In any case, Postdoctoral Programmes under COFUND will not support "recruitment schemes" to fill regular research vacancies. Researchers, who are already permanently employed by the organisation hosting them, cannot be funded by COFUND.

⁶ Please refer to [MSCA Guidelines on Supervision | Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions \(europa.eu\)](#)

2.2. Application and overall EU contribution per Grant agreement

Each application can only cover one of the two types of programmes. If applicants wish to apply for both a Doctoral and a Postdoctoral Programme, or more than one Doctoral or Postdoctoral Programmes, then separate applications must be prepared and submitted, bearing in mind that a beneficiary can only receive a maximum EU contribution of EUR 10 million per call. If an applicant submits two or more successful applications totalling more than EUR 10 million within one call, the applicant will be required to decide which of these proposals to implement at the GAP (Grant Agreement Preparation) phase.

2.3. Participating organisations

Participating organisations in COFUND are legal entities that fund or manage Doctoral Programmes or Postdoctoral Programmes for researchers, or that recruit, supervise, host or train researchers. Participating organisations (beneficiary and both Implementing/Associated partners) can be from the academic sector or the non-academic sector:

2.3.1. The Beneficiary

COFUND is a mono-beneficiary action. Only one legal entity established in an EU Member State or Horizon Europe Associated Country will apply to the COFUND scheme through the Funding and Tenders Portal, as beneficiary.

An International European Research Organisation' (IERO)⁷ is eligible to apply for COFUND and receive funding, including if it is established in a country which is neither an EU Member State nor a HE Associated Country.

2.3.2. Partners

The beneficiary may fund, recruit, supervise, host or train the researchers, either on its own or in conjunction with Implementing and Associated partners.

- **Implementing Partners**

Implementing partners are legal entities receiving financial support from the beneficiary and implementing the MSCA COFUND Doctoral or Postdoctoral Programme. Implementing partners are not signatories of the Grant Agreement. Therefore, they cannot claim costs of the programme directly from the European Research Executive Agency (REA)

Implementing partners can employ researchers. Implementing partners that recruit researchers in the context of a Doctoral or Postdoctoral Programme must be established in an EU Member State, the Overseas Countries and Territories (OCTs) linked to the Member States, HE

⁷ IERO means an international organisation, the majority of whose members are EU Member States or Horizon Europe Associated Countries, and whose principal objective is to promote scientific and technological cooperation in Europe (see Article 2(14) of the Regulation establishing Horizon Europe - the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation, laying down its rules for participation and dissemination

Associated Country, or low- and middle-income third countries included in the list of countries eligible for funding provided in the [Horizon Europe Programme Guide](#).⁸

Implementing partners known at the proposal stage must be listed in the section 5 of the part B2.

- **Associated Partners**

Associated partners are entities which participate in the action (e.g. providing training or secondments), but without the right to charge costs or claim contributions. They contribute to the implementation of the action, but do not sign the Grant agreement. Associated partners may not employ the researchers under the action.

Associated partners can be established anywhere in the world and can be from any sectors.

Associated partners known at the proposal stage must be included under the participants section in the part A of the proposal as well as in the relevant section in the part B2 (section 5).

2.4. Partnership Agreement

If the proposal is funded, and partners are involved, the signature of a partnership agreement between the beneficiary and all partners is strongly recommended to regulate the internal relationship between all participating organisations. The partnership agreement must comply with the obligations laid down in the Grant agreement.

2.5. Letters of Commitment

Please note:

- (1) Implementing partners known at the time of proposal submission must provide a letter of commitment in Part B of the proposal, which explicitly states their precise role in the action and their exact and quantified financial contributions if any. The contribution from any of these implementing partners (financial or not) for which no such evidence of commitment is submitted or is incomplete will not be taken into account during evaluation
- (2) Associated partners known at the time of proposal submission that commit to provide financial contribution must include a letter of commitment in the proposal. The financial contribution from any of these associated partners for which no such evidence of commitment is submitted or is incomplete will not be taken into account during evaluation.
- (3) Both Implementing and Associated partners must be included in the overview of all the identified Associated and Implementing partners provided in Table 5.1 in part B2 of the proposal.

⁸https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/horizon/guidance/programme-guide_horizon_en.pdf

In case potential beneficiaries do not know the Implementing and/or Associated partners at the time of application, these can be added during the lifetime of the project for both Doctoral and Postdoctoral schemes.

3. ELIGIBILITY AND SUPPORTED RESEARCHERS

In each COFUND action, a minimum of three researchers must be recruited. **COFUND proposals proposing research training for fewer than three researchers will be deemed ineligible.**

Recruited researchers can be of any nationality and must comply with the following mobility rule: they must not have resided or carried out their main activity (work, studies, etc.) in the country of the recruiting beneficiary or implementing partner for more than 12 months in the 36 months immediately before the deadline of the co-funded programme's call.

3.1. Doctoral Programmes

Researchers must be doctoral candidates, i.e. not already in possession of a doctoral degree at the deadline of the co-funded programme's call. Researchers who have successfully defended their doctoral thesis but who have not yet formally been awarded the doctoral degree will NOT be considered eligible. Researchers must be enrolled in a Doctoral Programme leading to the award of a doctoral degree in at least one EU Member State or Horizon Europe Associated Country.

3.2. Postdoctoral Programmes

Researchers must be in possession of a doctoral degree at the deadline of the co-funded programme's call. Researchers who have successfully defended their doctoral thesis but who have not yet formally been awarded the doctoral degree will also be considered as postdoctoral researchers and will be considered eligible to apply. A medical doctor degree⁹ will be accepted only when it corresponds to a doctoral degree or if the researcher can demonstrate his/her appointment in a position that requires doctoral equivalency (e.g. professorship appointment).

4. DURATION OF THE ACTION

The maximum duration of the action must be 60 months from the starting date set out in the Grant Agreement, however shorter programmes are possible depending of the specificity of the proposed training. Normally, the duration of the programmes vary between 36 and 60 months from the starting date specified in the Grant Agreement.

The minimum duration of each fellowship (on the basis of full-time employment) must be three months.

- Doctoral Programmes:

The fellow must be employed for at least the period taken to achieve a PhD.

⁹ Medical doctor degrees corresponding to basic medical training as defined in Annex V of Directive 2005/36/EC will not be considered a doctoral degree.

- Postdoctoral Programmes:

The typical duration of the researchers' individual fellowships varies from 12 to 36 months.

5. SECONDMENTS

Secondments of the researcher to other partners are encouraged, but should be relevant, feasible and beneficial for the researchers, and in line with the project objectives. They are an integral part of the proposal and must be described in the proposal.

Normal practice during secondments is for the recruited researchers to keep their contract with the sending institution, which also pays their travel and subsistence expenses (e.g. accommodation, visa, residency card). During their secondment, researchers receive supervision and training at the premises of the beneficiary or of the Associated partners / Implementing partners. The premises of these institutions must be independent from each other and therefore the secondment must involve physical mobility of the fellow, with specific supervision arrangements. Secondments should be differentiated from short visits, i.e. of a few days.

The duration of the secondments should be limited to a maximum of one third of the actual months spent implementing the research training activities under the action or, if applicable, of the duration of the outgoing phase for Postdoctoral Programmes where the main part of the research training activity does not take place in an EU Member State or a Horizon Europe Associated Country.

Secondments can in principle take place anywhere in the world to both academic and non-academic sectors.

6. EVALUATION, SELECTION AND RECRUITMENT OF RESEARCHERS

The selection procedure for doctoral and postdoctoral candidates must be open, transparent, merit-based, impartial and equitable as set out in the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers. The vacancy notice (to be widely advertised, including on the [EURAXESS website](#)) must include the minimum gross salary (not including employer's social contributions) offered to the researcher.

6.1. Doctoral Programmes

The call planning (timing and number of calls) should be clearly explained in Part B of the proposal. This plan will become contractually binding for successful proposals and researchers can only be appointed through a call.

Independent evaluators, from outside the partnership (not linked to the beneficiary and partners if any), with no conflict of interest, must be involved at all stages of the evaluation process in the evaluation of each submitted application. The Selection committees in charge of selecting the doctoral candidates **must include independent experts from outside partnership.** The members must have an adequate gender balance and relevant expertise and experience to assess the candidates.

A good balance between experts related to the beneficiary/partners and independent experts from outside the partnership must be ensured in the pool of evaluators and in the selection committees.

6.2. Postdoctoral Programmes

Postdoctoral Programmes *can have a single call or in the case of several calls* they should have regular selection rounds following fixed deadlines or regular cut-off dates, allowing fair competition between applying researchers. There must be no more than 4 deadlines or cut-off dates per year.

The call planning (timing and number of calls) should be clearly explained in Part B of the proposal.

There must be substantial involvement at each submitted application and at all stages of the evaluation process, of independent evaluators based in other countries, with no conflict of interest. Selection of the postdoctoral candidates will be done by the Selection committees, whose members include international independent experts from outside partnership, moreover, the members must also have an adequate gender balance and possess the relevant expertise and experience to assess the candidates.

A good balance between experts related to the beneficiary and independent international experts from outside the partnership (based in other countries than the beneficiary and the partners – if any) must be ensured in the pool of evaluators and in the selection committees.

7. INSTRUCTIONS FOR COMPLETING PART A AND B OF THE PROPOSAL

Applications must be complete and contain all parts and supporting documents: fill in the submission forms online that will become part A of the proposal and upload parts B1 and B2.

A proposal will then consist of an administrative part (**Part A**, filled in online via the submission forms). Please note that the Associated partners must be listed in the part A (under the Participants' section) as well as in the part B2. Implementing partners must be listed in the part B2 only. For more detailed instructions please refer to the templates.

Furthermore, the section "Researchers involved in the proposal" under the Participants' section in the part A is not applicable, and therefore must be kept empty as in COFUND researchers have not yet been recruited at the submission stage.

A narrative **part B** composed of two separate PDF files (Part B1 and Part B2), must be uploaded as separate PDF files:

1. **Part B1**, containing a maximum of 34 (thirty four) A4-sized pages. Any excess pages (i.e. numerical page 35 and beyond) will not be available to the evaluators;
2. **Part B2**, with no strict page limit for A4-sized pages but applicants should respect the instructions given per section.

The MSCA COFUND proposal template (part B1 and part B2) can be downloaded from the [call page on the EU Funding and Tenders Portal](#) and the [REA website](#). All instructions for completing part B1 and B2 of the proposal as well as requirements with regard to the minimum font size allowed are embedded in the [template](#). These instructions must be removed before proposal submission. A clean version is also available at the end of the template.

We strongly encourage you to submit your proposal as soon as possible. It remains possible to reopen, edit and resubmit your proposal as many times as required before the call deadline.