

THIS PRACTICAL GUIDE AIMS TO HELP MSCA-PF APPLICANTS IN WRITING THE PROPOSAL SECTIONS IN LINE WITH THE EVALUATORS EXPECTATIONS. IT SHOULD NOT BE SEEN AS A SUBSTITUTE OF THE OFFICIAL GUIDE FOR MSCA-PF APPLICANTS, BUT AS A COMPLEMENTING GUIDE, WITH PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS AND TIPS.

MSCA-PF

A PRACTICAL GUIDE

RESEARCH SUPPORT OFFICE [RSO]

June 2022

BEFORE WRITING YOUR PROPOSAL

Are you a supervisor wanting to host a Marie Skłodowska-Curie fellow at your institute, or a candidate?

- A MSCA-PF fellowship is prestigious and beneficial for both the host/supervisor, as well as their fellow.
- For the *host*, MSCA-PF is a mean to attract leading and up-and-coming researchers to the institution/research group, thereby enhancing global visibility and attractiveness. The knowledge transfer will strengthen the research capacity of the host, allowing for strong research and innovation partnerships to be formed, both across countries and sectors. Having supervised MSCA-PF fellows will also look good on your CV!
- For the *fellow*, a MSCA-PF fellowship will allow you to gain new knowledge and skills, both in and outside of academia, as well as in inter-sectoral and interdisciplinary environments. You will have access to leading organisations and their teams, and opportunities to increased networking and visibility in the European R&I community. Together, this will increase both your career prospects and employability, and boost your CV.

How to match the host/supervisor and fellow

- As a *supervisor*, there are several ways to go about to find a candidate, including:
 - Search for candidates already on site. This is of course a very convenient option, as it allows the candidate and supervisor to easily engage and discuss a potential project. Still, have in mind that the candidate must comply to the mobility rules of MSCA, and also change research focus to be considered competitive.
 - Talk to your established network. Perhaps your colleagues in other countries know of someone who may be interested in carrying out a project in your group?
 - Participate in conferences. When presenting your own work, make it clear that you are actively looking, but also scan for possible candidates among the other presenters.
 - Advertise for a candidate on the web. You can post your hosting offers on the [EURAXESS portal](#) for free. Start by creating a login and register to the organization profile. Umeå University already has a profile registered; while selecting this you will also choose the relevant department. The posting procedure is quite simple, but a [tutorial](#) is available if needed. Contact the [Research Support Office](#) at rso@umu.se if you want assistance with creating and posting your offer.
- As a *fellow*, find the perfect supervisor for you by talking to your colleagues and your established network, scan conferences or look for hosting offers at the [EURAXESS](#) webpage.
- Choose your supervisor and host institution carefully! Your future supervisor must have an excellent CV, experience of supervising postdocs, as well as enough time for

supporting you and your project throughout the duration of your fellowship. The host must be also able to provide the right infrastructure and training.

- Discuss your project idea/intent with your supervisor far in advance and make sure to get help and input also with preparing the grant proposal.
- Writing the proposal should be a team effort!

What distinguishes MSCA-PF from other research grants?

- MSCA-PF is considered one of Europe's most competitive and prestigious research and innovation fellowships.
- MSCA-PF is not a typical research project, but rather a training through research. Thus, do not focus solely on the scientific agenda and your research objectives, but also describe how the fellowship and your suggested training activities will contribute to your professional ambitions and future independence.
- When applying for a MSCA fellowship, it is strongly recommended that you change your research focus, rather than proposing a project that represents a continuation or deeper investigation of your current topic. The latter project is less likely to expand your skills and knowledge, and therefore has less chances of being funded.
- Since you are expected to explore a new topic/field, preliminary results are *not* essential. This sets MSCA-PF apart from many other grant schemes. With or without preliminary data, the project still needs to be feasible.

What are my chances of success?

- The competition for MSCA-PF is high. The current success rate is 13,6% (European fellowship) and 15,6% (Global fellowship) (8356 applicants submitted proposals in 2021).
- Check the [CORDIS](#) website for funded projects to get a better idea of what kinds of proposals are funded.
- A common error is that candidates often focus too much on the scientific excellence-part, underestimating the importance of the impact- and implementation-parts. Be sure that you understand the MSCA-PF's evaluation criteria! To be successful, your proposal needs to demonstrate high quality for all of the following parts: (i) scientific excellence, (ii) proposed training, (iii) impact of the research and training on the fellow's future career, the host institution and on European research, and (iv) mentoring skills and experience of the supervisor.
- Increase your chances of success by not applying for “more of the same”, instead apply with a different research focus, including activities that you have not had in the past.
- Make sure that your proposal is written in a clear and accessible way, since all evaluators may not be in your immediate field.
- Use the headings of the proposal template to avoid any deduction of points, but introduce subheadings that fit your narrative.

How to start writing and finding information?

- Once you have secured a host institution and supervisor, take the time to gain a proper understanding of what is expected from you, through the [MSCA-PF Guide for Applicants](#), and [MSCA Work Programme for Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions](#). Here you will find summarised the main rules and requirements for the fellowship.
- Focus first on part B. The template you can download from [Funding & tender opportunities portal](#). Before you start writing the complete proposal, formulate and describe to yourself:
 1. What you want to do (formulate aims and training activities)
 2. Why you want to do it (impact)
 3. How (implementation)
- Part A is filled in online in the portal and consists of information about the researcher and the participating host institution, a gender equality plan, budget, ethics, keywords and some call specific questions.
- Contact the [Research Support Office at Umeå University](#) at rso@umu.se for a one-to-one meeting to talk through the requirements for applying, discuss the proposal and straighten out possible question marks. RSO will also provide feedback on your draft, during the writing phase, as many times as you wish! Do not wait to the last week to get feedback, since there may not be enough time for addressing potential issues then.
- MSCA do not provide access to granted proposals. Instead you have to ask successful colleagues if they are willing to share their proposals with you. RSO can assist you by directing you to previous recipients. Take the opportunity to discuss your idea with successful applicants.

How much time should I spend on the proposal?

- This is very individual, but we recommend you to start writing as far in advance as possible. Reserve at least 2-4 months for intense preparation, to have enough time to draft, redraft and refine the proposal.
- Feedback is essential! Make sure you have set aside enough time to get as well as use input from your supervisor, host institution and more experienced colleagues. Also be sure to take feedback from the [Research Support Office](#), as they have extensive experience of evaluating proposals for individual MSCA fellowships. Feedback can really make a difference for the outcome and success of your proposal.

GUIDELINES TO WRITING YOUR PROPOSAL

Drafting the different parts of the proposal

1. Excellence

1.1. 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)

- What is expected here is an introduction, a description of the State-of-the-art (*i.e.* current research frontier) and a presentation of your overall aim and research objectives. Here you have the option of introducing subheadings of your own choice. Label these with appropriate numbers (*e.g.* 1.1.1, 1.1.2 etc). An example is shown below:

1.1.1. Introduction, aims and objectives

- Write in a style accessible also to the non-experts in your particular subject. Insert figures/tables/charts/diagrams for illustration where appropriate.
- Build a good story by addressing the following:
 - Describe what the project is all about – *create a context*
 - Pinpoint the research problem – *explain why it is important, and perhaps timely.*
 - Explain why the problem has not been solved yet – *spell out the challenges.*
 - Describe your novel idea to address the challenges – *briefly explain what you will do. Will you investigate a hypothesis/ topic/ concept that nobody has focussed on so far?*
 - Define your overall aim and the objectives to reach this aim – *highlight them for clarity, e.g. in frame or by using bold font, and use the same naming throughout the proposal. Remember, objectives should be realistic, measurable and verifiable.*
 - Explain the impact if you succeed – *how you will move the current research frontier and practice.*
- Remember, to succeed, you need to attract the evaluator's interest already on the first page.

1.1.2. State-of-the-art

- Show that you can capture the most important information essential for understanding your project goals, while still keeping this section brief.
- Highlight where the gap in current knowledge is that you aim to investigate.
- Address how your project fits into the existing knowledge base and how it will progress the research beyond State-of-the-art.
- Use *up-to-date* references, also from you/your supervisor if appropriate. The latter demonstrates your excellence and supports that you are the right person/host to do it.

1.2. 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, including sharing and management of research outputs and engagement of citizens, civil society and end users, where appropriate)

- Introduce subheadings of your own choice. Label these with appropriate numbers (*e.g.* 1.2.1, 1.2.2 etc). An example is shown below:

1.2.1. Overall methodology

- We recommended you to follow the structure of your research objectives and then describe the steps/methods that you will take to enable each of these.
- For each objective:
 - Highlight the experiments, blocks of work to be carried out, techniques and equipment that will be used. Because of space limitations, pinpoint only the most interesting/original/innovative methods, and list the remaining ones in the order they will be used, avoiding details.
 - Describe any methodological challenges identified, and explain how you plan to overcome them.
 - Put in brackets the research work package (WP) that the objective relates to.
 - Conclude the expected outcome
- If a secondment or a short visit are included, explain why this is important in terms of the work proposed (access to equipment, data etc).
- Highlight the novelty of your approach. Are you proposing a novel methodological approach that no one has ever used before? Will you develop innovative technology?

1.2.2. The interdisciplinary aspects of the project

- Interdisciplinarity means the integration of information, data, techniques, tools, perspectives, concepts or theories from two or more scientific disciplines.
- MSCA-PF projects lying at the intersection of two or more academic disciplines is appreciated (although not mandatory), as it will expand your knowledgebase and experiences, and provide border-crossing insights.
- Demonstrate how the research that will be carried out goes beyond the discipline that is strictly yours.
- Highlight the key interdisciplinary aspects of your proposal (research methodology, expertise, supervision, dissemination etc.)

1.2.3. Gender dimension and other diversity aspects

- In research activities where human beings are involved as subjects or end-users, or animal models are being used, gender differences may exist. In these cases, the gender dimension in the research content has to be addressed as an integral part of the proposal.

- Note that the term gender dimensions deal with sex and gender analysis in the *research content*, which is different from gender balance in the research group!
- Addressing gender dimensions and diversity aspects can be done at various stages in your proposal or project: while framing your research question(s), during the analysis phase, when collecting data, when reporting your results, and during stakeholder engagement.
- For guidance on Gender dimension and diversity aspects, consult the relevant section of the [HE Programme Guide](#).

1.2.4. Open science practices

- Open science is an approach based on open cooperative work and systematic sharing of knowledge and tools as early and widely as possible in the process. This allows for the verification of scientific results, faster scientific enquiries and discoveries.
- For publications, an open access mode is mandatory; you can also save your publications and data in available repositories.
- Describe how you will make research outputs, *e.g.* publications, data, software, models, algorithms, and workflows, publicly available.
- For guidance on Open science practices, consult the relevant section of the [HE Programme Guide](#).

1.2.5. Research data management and management of other research outputs

- Research data is any information that has been collected, observed, generated or created to validate original research findings. It may include *e.g.* recordings, photographs and slides, test results, specimens, questionnaires, code and software (publications excluded).
- Describe how your research data will be managed in line with the FAIR principles (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable).
- For guidance on Research data management, consult the relevant section of the [HE Programme Guide](#).

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

- Note: for *Global Fellowships* you should describe the three-way transfer of knowledge between the researcher, host organisation, and associated partner for outgoing phase. If relevant, describe the rationale and added-value of the non-academic placement in this section.
- Introduce subheadings of your own choice. Label these with appropriate numbers (*e.g.* 1.3.1, 1.3.2 etc). An example is shown below:

1.3.1. Qualifications and experience of the supervisor(s)

- Present your supervisor(s) and his/her key achievements in the research area, such as:
 - Years' of experience in the field
 - Awards and prizes received (exemplify)
 - National and international collaboration in the field, (*e.g.* across sectors or disciplines)
 - Major grants obtained (exemplify)
 - Experience of supervision (*i.e.* number of PhDs, postdocs), if there are any particularly successful alumni from the supervisor's group
 - Number of publications (provide key highlights), number of citations, h-index
 - Patents, commercialization, spin-offs etc

1.3.2. Planned training activities and two-way transfer of knowledge between the researcher and the host organizations

1.3.2.1. Transfer of knowledge from the host to the fellow.

What training will you get from your new supervisor, your new colleagues, and your host institution? What skills will you develop? How will it contribute to bringing the project to success?

Describe the different types of skills that you will develop, including:

- *Core research skills* - skills related directly through implementation of your project.
- *Advanced research skills* - skills that can enhance your competencies in the specific research area(s), and that can be developed through training activities, such as training courses, workshops, seminar series, and journal/discussion clubs.
- *Transferable skills* - skills that can be transferable to future employments, *e.g.* project management, grant writing, teaching, public speaking, leadership, problem solving, and networking.

Compared to section 2.1 (*Credibility of the measures to enhance the career perspectives and employability of the researcher and contribution to his/her skills development*), section 1.3.2. is more about how your current personal and professional experience and the proposed research will contribute to your further development DURING the fellowship.

1.3.2.2. Transfer of knowledge from the fellow to the host.

How will the host benefit from the fellowship? Describe your current expertise, skills, state of the art techniques, existing collaborations/networks etc that could fill current "gaps" in the research team and the host.

What specific measures will you take to embed your knowledge into the host organisation (*e.g.* mentoring students, delivering workshops, attending conferences, building collaborations)?

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

- Present a short summary of your career so far and your *existing* knowledge and expertise. Explain how these skills and experiences will help you achieve the proposed project.

2. Impact

- This section describes the effect that your project will have on individuals (you or your supervisor), the host institution and society (scientific community, students, patients, EU etc).
- Introduce subheadings of your own choice. Label these with appropriate numbers (*e.g.* 2.2.1, 2.2.2 etc). An example is shown below:

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

- Introduce your specific career goals/ambitions (you can mention more than just one intended career direction), *e.g.* get an ERC, become senior lecturer or group leader.
- Describe the expected skills/experiences that you will develop during the fellowship.
- Explain how the newly gained skills/experience will help you achieve independence and improve your future employability and career prospects both inside and outside academia, AFTER the fellowship has ended.

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

2.2.1. Plan for dissemination and exploitation activities, including communication activities.

- Be as specific as you can when describing the different activities. Provide details! *E.g. what* scientific papers do you aim to publish in, *what* seminars will you attend? Motivate your choice of target groups.

Dissemination

- Is about maximizing the impact of your *research results*, by promoting them or by raising the awareness of them.
- Remind the evaluator what the key project results/outcomes of your project will be, for example:
 - Knowledge (data, recommendations, policy, methodology, guidelines)
 - Products (software, prototype, GMO, material, algorithm, tool kit)
 - Services (analyses, advices, consulting, training)
- Identify the target groups for your dissemination activities (*i.e.* the potential users of the results). This may include *e.g.*:
 - The scientific community
 - Industry

- o Policy makers
- o Financial actors
- o Organizations
- o Companies
- o Civil society
- Explain how dissemination will occur. Examples may include:
 - o Scientific papers
 - o Workshops
 - o Conferences
 - o Datasharing in research repositories
 - o Public databases
 - o Industry events
 - o Social media
- Include dissemination activities and their timing in the Gantt chart in Implementation section 3.1.

Communication

- Is about making your research known to society, by promoting your *whole project*, including its results, achievements, expectations, project activities etc.
- Activities should start at the outset and continue through the entire lifetime of the project.
- Communication activities target a much wider audience than do dissemination activities. Target groups may include *e.g.*:
 - o Press and media
 - o General public
 - o Decision-makers
 - o End-users (*e.g.* patients, industry, specific clients)
 - o Interested groups (*e.g.* researchers, other experts, students, parents)
- Explain how communication of the project or its outcome will be achieved for each identified target group. Match outreach activities and target groups with care. Outreach activities may include:
 - o Publishing (*e.g.* scientific publications, popular science publications, newsletter articles, press releases, reports, leaflets)
 - o Participation in public events (*e.g.* international conferences, seminars, meetings, European Researchers' Night)
 - o Using social media
 - o Radio, TV, YouTube, podcasts, videos or apps

Exploitation

- Is about making practical use of your *research results*, either for commercial or policy making purposes.
- Discuss whether the result is commercially exploitable and patentable or not. Show that you are aware of exploitation possibilities.
- If you plan to generate exploitable results, discuss the commercial value and to whom this may be of interest.

2.2.2. Strategy for the management of intellectual property, foreseen protection measures

- If relevant, discuss the strategy for the management of intellectual property, foreseen protection measures, such as patents, design rights, copyright, trade secrets, etc., and how these would be used to support exploitation.
- Note that even if you do *not* foresee the need for a strategy for IP management, contact with the technology transfer office at the host organisation may still be advisable, and worth mentioning in the proposal.

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

- Here you should describe additional dimensions of the project's impact, indicating magnitude and importance.
- Think broadly – how will the project contribute to EU scientific excellence, innovation and competitiveness?
- Consider the immediate impact and long-term impact if relevant, but only include impacts where your project makes a significant and direct contribution.
- State the target groups that will benefit from the project.

3. Quality and Efficiency of the Implementation

3.1. Quality and effectiveness of the work plan, assessment of risks and appropriateness of the effort assigned to work packages

- Structure your work plan into Work packages (WPs), one for each research objective. For example, WP1 would relate to objective 1, WP2 to objective 2 etc. Work packages help you create a logical structure in the work and to effectively allocate time and human effort.
- Keep the work plan realistic – 2-5 WPs may be feasible for a 2-year fellowship. These can run sequentially or concurrently and can be interconnected. Each WP is further divided into one or several activities or Tasks (T).
- Highlight the strengths and feasibility of the work plan, by describing how the work packages, their timing and the workload make sense for allowing you to complete all the

proposed activities.

- For each WP, propose one or more Deliverables (D), corresponding to the outcomes of the action. Deliverables may include *e.g.* publication, conference presentations, databases, websites, reports, posters, prototypes, data collection, patents etc. Label these according to the WP and objective they belong to, for example D1.1 (first deliverable of Objective 1), D1.2 (second deliverable of Objective1) etc.
- Have at least one deliverable per task (in most cases at the end of the task) to assess the quality of its achievements. For tasks with longer duration, an intermediary deliverable can be useful.
- The work plan must also include Milestones (M), which correspond to control points that mark significant events along the project. These control points may be placed at the end of important work packages or tasks, corresponding to the achievement of a key result/deliverable. They may also be included at intermediary points, allowing you to, at any given moment in the project, check whether you are ahead or behind schedule against the milestones of the proposal. If behind, corrective measures can be taken to help solve the problem.
- Contrary to deliverables, milestones do not need to be linked to a specific WP, but can be attributed to several WPs at the same time. Refer to Milestones as MS1 (first milestone), MS2 (second milestone) etc.
- A visual representation of the work plan displayed against time, *i.e.* a Gantt chart, is mandatory. Here you should highlight the proposed Work packages, tasks, deliverables, milestones, dissemination and communication activities, and, if relevant, secondments, and placements. Make sure that the proposed time frame for each WP and the dependency relationship between individuals WPs is easy to distinguish.
- Importantly, the work plan must include mechanisms in place to both assess and mitigate risks that may endanger your project. These may include *experimental risks* (risks directly related to your research), *e.g.* inability to sufficiently optimize a method or not achieving the expected research results. They can also include *operational risks* (risks caused by circumstances unrelated to the scientific work), *e.g.* lack of suitable facilities to conduct the planned research, data loss, or incapability of the fellow to integrate into the new group/host.

3.2. Quality and capacity of the host institutions and participating organisations, including hosting arrangements

- Start with describing the host, in terms of the overall size of the research community and infrastructure, the number of departments, research centers, groups etc.
- Next, describe the Department/Centre/Unit/Group where you will join. Use your own wording (do not merely copy-paste the information that they have on their websites!).
- Argue that you will have access to everything needed to carry out the project to completion:
 - Describe the administrative and logistics support services available, *e.g.* help related to finances, human resources, legal issues, managing international grants as well as support for foreign researchers.

- Measures to integrate the research in the team/institution, *e.g.* weekly meetings with the supervisor/supervisory committee and the research team that will provide feedback on the work and career progress, seminar series, discussions, interchange and collaboration, training programs or academic courses for researchers and early career researchers etc.
- Note that relevant facilities, infrastructures, equipment, libraries, collections, laboratories, etc, needed for the execution of the project should not be mentioned here, but in Part B2 (Table 5.2 *Capacity of the participating organizations*).
- Remember, the host environment should be considered as stimulating to research, as to training and networking!

AFTER WRITING THE PROPOSAL

Submission and notification

- Read it repeatedly and revise until perfection before pressing the submission button.
- The day before submission, upload each „completed“ part of the proposal in case the final upload at the last minute fails.
- Make sure you have uploaded the Support Letter from the host institution.
- Under participants and future beneficiary, in part A of your proposal, add Anders Wennström (anders.wennstrom@umu.se) from RSO as additional „contact person“. If technical issues/errors arise during the submission process, he will then be able to go into the system and have a closer look at these errors.
- After approximately 5 months from deadline, you will be informed by email that the Evaluation Summary Report (ESR) is accessible from the [Funding & tender opportunities portal](#).