

Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions Doctoral Network: Researcher Experience

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Introduction



Consortium Building

Funding

Recruitment and Supervision



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Personal Background



BioTrib-AVN

Fortunate to work with some of Europe's leading researchers.

- Co-ordinator MSCA ITN SpineFX (2009-2013) €3M
- Beneficiary MSCA ITN Nu-Spine (2019-2022) €4.1M
- Co-ordinator MSCA ITN BioTrib (2021 to 2024) €4.3M
- Beneficiary MSCA DN Custom (2025-29) €4.5M
- Co-ordinator MSCA PF BioTrib AVN (2022-2024) €0.24M

Also

- Co-ordinator FP7 IP LifeLongJoints (2013-18) €18.3M
- Beneficiary H2020 BioRIMA, Funding (2017-21) €8.8M

Reviewer/Rapporteur for EU grant funding



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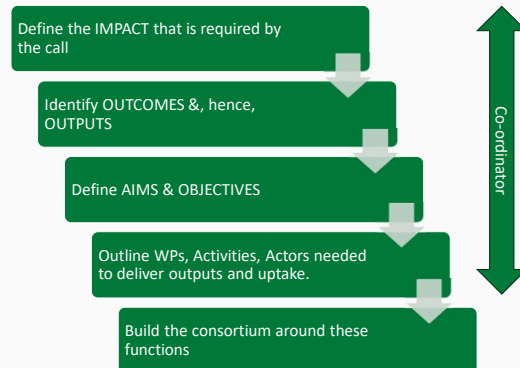
Consortium Building



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Build the Consortium After Designing the Impact Pathway

The Wrong Way
Build the consortium
'The mates'
Shoe-in the actors
Nebulous A&O
Misaligned Impact



Every Partner Must Have a Clear and Necessary Function

"nice to have" partners weaken credibility.

Evaluators ask:

- Why is this partner here?
- What unique function do they perform?
- What would fail if they were removed?

Weak proposals often include:

- Multiple academic partners with overlapping expertise
- Industry partners with unclear exploitation roles
- Stakeholders listed but not integrated into work packages

Strong proposals demonstrate:

- Clear functional differentiation
- Explicit role in outputs and/or outcomes
- Justified person-month allocation aligned to tasks

Consortium Composition Must Deliver Impact

Even a research training programme needs to deliver impact

- Career enhancement of the DC
- To society, economic...

Horizon Europe is impact-driven, consortia must include actors who can:

- Reach target groups
- Influence practice or policy
- Support commercialisation
- Facilitate regulatory navigation
- Enable behavioural or societal change

This may include:

- Industry (for scale and market access)
- Policymakers or regulators (for policy uptake)
- Practitioners (for implementation testing)
- Social sciences and humanities experts (for user need, adoption barriers)
- User groups (for legitimacy and relevance)

Avoid Overlapping Beneficiary & Associate Partner Clusters

Integrate SSH and Interdisciplinarity Properly
Avoid Tokenistic Inclusion

Evaluators are sceptical of:

- Large numbers of actors doing similar technical work
- Fragmented tasks split for political or relational reasons
- Partners included for geographic balance without functional clarity

Design consortia that are:

- Lean but sufficient
- Complementary rather than duplicative
- Structured around delivery

Stakeholders vs Target Groups

Bring in SSH personnel to enable acceptance by key stakeholders.

Distinguish between:

Stakeholders: Anyone affected by or interested in the project (including critics or blockers)

Target groups: Those actively engaged to enable uptake

A strong consortium:

Identifies both

Includes AP capable of influencing them

Engages them early

Consortium Building Takes a Long Time!

Typically 3-6 months

And then there is:

- Summer Vacations
- Start of Term
- The unresponsive partner.

MSCA DN are Structurally More Complex

Multiple Legal and Administrative Systems	Alignment of Doctoral Training Philosophies	Cultural and Institutional Differences	Budget Architecture Is More Demanding	Governance and Coordination Design	Institutional Sign-Off Processes Are Slower Internationally	Building Trust Across Borders Takes Longer
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Strategic Implication

Innovate UK
UKRO
Personal Experience

Successful MSCA DN coordination requires:

- Starting at least 9–12 months before submission
- Early budget architecture agreement
- Early industrial engagement
- Template governance documentation
- Central coordination discipline

Example Timeline

Start Early
The Calls are in the Work Programme!

Phase	Months Before Deadline	Objectives
Concept	–12 to –10	Identify core partners Define training philosophy Establish impact logic
Consortium Formation	–10 to –7	Confirm full consortium Align doctoral systems Design training architecture Begin governance design
Architecture & Budget	–7 to –5	Confirm host allocations Structure work packages Align financial expectations
Drafting	–5 to –3	Write Excellence section Write Impact section Refine training plan Integrate SSH/intersectorality
Governance & Review	–3 to –2	Refine management structures Confirm institutional sign-off Validate ethics and open science
Finalisation	–2 to 0	Eliminate weaknesses Strengthen coherence Final proofing

Funding



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Funding: Resource

MSCA Doctoral Networks	Contributions for recruited researchers per person-month					Institutional unit contributions per person-month	
	Living allowance	Mobility allowance	Family allowance (if applicable)	Long-term leave allowance (if applicable)	Special needs allowance (if applicable)	Research, training, and networking contribution	Management and indirect contribution
	EUR 4250	EUR 710	EUR 660	EUR 4960 x % covered by the beneficiary	requested unit ¹⁾ x (1/number of months)	EUR 1600	EUR 1200

Living Allowance: country coefficient correction factor – to allow equal purchasing power between DCs

Maximum Funds to a single country (40 % of the budget NOT the number of DCs)

Hence, the maximum DCs in the UK is 5.



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Funding: Resource

Doctoral Candidates (DCs)

DN up to 15 (previously 10)

EID/EJD up to 15

Research and Training Contributions Cover DC expenses:

Incoming costs, flight, visa, HIS etc.

Delivery/Attendance at Network Wide Events

Local Training

Fieldwork/Laboratory Expenses

Workshop/Conference Attendance

Dissemination

Public Engagement

Staff Travel in Support of DN training

Non-DC costs covered in the management and indirect contribution:

Agreed proportion of the M&IC allocation given to the co-ordinator to cover management

Project Officer: 2-3 days per week.

Website & Social media: PGR 2 hours per week.

...

Given minimal overhead need to maximise benefit through other aspects

Maximise DCs

Ensure other DCs benefit from the DN

Capture training experience

Strategic importance



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Funding: Research and Training Expenses

Activity/Item (Assumptions: 3 DCs, Budget = €172800)	Approx. Costs
Cost associated with Visa Applications, Immigration Healthcare Surcharge, Language Certification	€12,000
Training expenses (DC to 6 x 4-day workshops f2f)	€18,000
Delivery of 2 workshops (8 days, f2f incl.: 2 days of a professional trainers, room hire etc – DC and other participants pay their own accom. and travel)	€10,000
Conferences (2 UK + 1 International/DC)	€18,000
Secondments	€60,000
Research Expenses (including, additional training expenses, IT)	~ €70,000 = €600/mth

Costs are indicative. The exact costs will depend on the individual DCs, activities and research type



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Funding - Pitfalls

01

Funding only for three years

02

Okay for UK model?

03

Continental model (1+3 models) - Resource for additional years?

04

UK researchers – salary boost - Not so for many countries in Europe - additional resource?

Confirm additional resource with partners early in the consortium building stage

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Funding - Pitfalls



Transferring funding is burdensome
Keep to indirect costs – set out in the consortium agreement



PhD registration mandatory
Registering external PhDs?
International Fees?



Co-ordinator: Higher admin burden
Reduce deliverables/MS
Maximise # of DCs to 4/5



Need to ensure training (workshop, secondments) expenses α DCs

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Recruitment and Supervision

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Recruitment

Get the fundamentals right

- Risk managed workstream
- Put in place contingencies
- As co-ordinator or scientist in charge you are the responsible person
- Align recruitment with supervision, training, secondments and doctoral enrolment requirements

Recruitment must be international, open and compliant

- Open, internationally visible
- EURAXESS
- Strategy for targeting underrepresented groups
- Candidates may be any nationality subject to mobility rule

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Recruitment: Process

Recruitment:

- Plan recruitment before grant agreement is signed off
- Single network wide recruitment process [?]
- Launch process as early as possible
- Allow time for eligibility, mobility and visa checks

Interviews

- Use mixed panels including academic and non-academic partners where relevant – Independent assessor/interviewer
- Record decisions, conflicts of interest and ranking outcomes
- Include EDI safeguards in advertising, shortlisting and interview practice
- Provide candidates with clear information on salary, allowances, secondments, doctoral enrolment, supervision and expected mobility



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Recruitment: Appointment

Recruit only where there is a clear project fit

Avoid marginal appointments

- Do not appoint candidates with unresolved doubts
- Poor fit creates delivery risk and increased workload
- Strong recruitment protects the network

Build in time to re-advertise if needed

- re: advertise early

Protect quality, fairness and auditability



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Section 1.4: Quality of the supervision



Quality of supervision for DN.

- Supervision arrangements
- Supervision meetings
 - Progress and review procedures, feedback mechanisms
 - Appropriate support for the DCs.
 - Supervision oversight – Governance, Doctoral School etc.



EU/REA view - Supervision

Employers and/or funders – lead supervisor is clearly identified and should inform the researchers accordingly.

Clearly define that the proposed supervisors are sufficiently expert and are able to offer the DC appropriate support and provide for the necessary progress and review procedures, as well as the necessary feedback mechanisms.



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Supervision I

DCs supported through a clear and robust supervisory structure, principal supervisor at the host institution and additional co-supervisors from across the network.

Scientific guidance, interdisciplinary input and intersectoral perspectives, research excellence and broader professional development.

Regular supervisory meetings, progress monitoring and personal development review supports

timely delivery, high-quality training and early identification of risks or support needs.

Collectively, supervision is designed **not only** to oversee the research project, but ...

... also to nurture independence, collaboration and future research leadership.



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Supervision II

Supervision underpinned by a clear governance structures to ensure consistency, quality and accountability across the doctoral network.

Supervisory Board oversees supervisory practice, monitors progress, reviews training quality and helps address risks, delays.

In conjunction with local arrangements

Agreed supervision arrangements, regular reporting and documented review points.

Supervision training, refresher training...

Support through a doctoral college...

Oversight framework strengthens

transparency,

promotes good supervisory practice across partners (Impact?)

ensures that local supervision is aligned with the aims of the MSCA DN.

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Myth Busters

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Myth 1

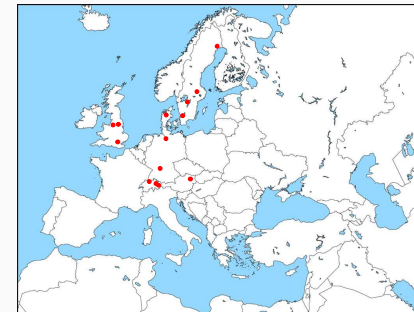
Need large consortia



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Myth 2

Need East European or Mediterranean partners



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Myth 3

Opaque Assessment Criteria



Excellence	Impact	Quality and efficiency of the implementation
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)	Contribution to structuring doctoral training at the European level and to strengthening European innovation capacity, including the potential for: a) meaningful contribution of the non-academic sector to the doctoral training, as appropriate to the implementation mode and research field b) developing sustainable elements of doctoral programmes	Quality and effectiveness of the work plan, assessment of risks and appropriateness of the effort assigned to work packages
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)	Capability of the measures to enhance the career perspectives and employability of researchers and contribution to their skills development	Quality, capacity and role of each participant, including housing arrangements and extent to which the consortium as a whole brings together the necessary expertise
Quality and credibility of the training programme (including transferable skills, interdisciplinary, inter-sectoral and gender as well as other diversity aspects)	Sustainability and quality of the measures to maximise expected outcomes and impacts, as set out in the dissemination and exploitation plan, including communication activities	
Quality of the supervision (including mandatory joint supervision for industrial Excellence)	The magnitude and importance of the project's contribution to the expected scientific, societal and economic impacts	Quality and efficiency of the implementation
(and joint doctorate projects)		
30%	30%	30%
Weighting		

Myth 4

Not for Early Career Academics



Postdoctoral Fellowship

- 1 Incoming Fellow – 2 years, or
- 1 Outgoing Fellow – 3 years

Doctoral Network

- 15 Doctoral Fellows, 3 years each
- Grant 4 years

Staff Exchanges

- All career grades

CoFund

- DF or PFs up to €10M MSCA funding
- Fellows 3 years each/Grant 5 years

Increasing leadership experience

Myth 5

Long proposals



Action	Proposal Length (part B)
Postdoctoral Fellowship	10 sides
Doctoral Network	30 sides

Comparison

EPSRC responsive mode ~11 sides

EPSRC programme grant ~25 sides (multistage)

Thank you
Questions

