



# 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 2025 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 and in the HE MSCA Financial Guide shall prevail in case of discrepancies.



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## History of Changes

| Version | Date       | Change          |
|---------|------------|-----------------|
| 1.0     | 07/08/2024 | Initial Version |
|         |            |                 |

**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 or Postdoctoral Programmes for researchers.

**Implementing Partners** means third parties implementing the MSCA COFUND Doctoral or Postdoctoral Programmes by recruiting researchers. Implementing Partners can receive financial support from the Beneficiary.

**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 <sup>(1)</sup>.

**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 organisations <sup>(2)</sup> and International European Research Organisations (IERO) <sup>(3)</sup>.

**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 <sup>(4)</sup>.

**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 HE Associated Countries. Be aware that if the proposal is selected, having a gender equality plan will

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<sup>(1)</sup> For COFUND Postdoctoral Programmes outgoing phase, this restriction does not apply. The associated partner hosting the outgoing phase can conclude an additional employment contract with the researcher to ensure adequate medical/social insurance in the outgoing country.

<sup>(2)</sup> If requested by the granting authority, institutions with self-declared research organisations status must provide evidence that their main objective is to carry out research and/or technological development. An assessment will be made on the basis of indicators such as share of research budget, volume of scientific publications and/or registered patents.

<sup>(3)</sup> '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).

<sup>(4)</sup> Regulation (EU) 2021/695 of 28 April 2021 (OJEU 12.05.2021, L170, p.1).

be necessary before the Grant Agreement signature; this requirement concerns legal entities applying as beneficiaries. [Please refer to the Horizon Europe guidance on gender equality plans.](#)

## 2. COFUND IN A NUTSHELL

### Overview:

| <b>Programme</b>                                      | <b>Doctoral</b>   | <b>Postdoctoral</b>  |
|---|---|--|
| <b>Minimum number of recruited researchers</b>        | 3   | 3  |
| <b>Number of Beneficiaries <sup>(5)</sup></b>         | 1   | 1  |
| <b>Number of Associated Partners</b>                  | No restrictions   | No restrictions  |
| <b>Number of Implementing Partners</b>                | No restrictions   | No restrictions  |
| <b>Minimum duration of each individual fellowship</b> | 3 months  | 3 months   |
| <b>Maximum duration of the action</b>                 | 60 months   | 60 months  |
| <b>Eligible researchers</b>                           | 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.  |
| <b>Selection of researchers</b>                       | 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. |

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<sup>(5)</sup> COFUND Doctoral or Postdoctoral Programmes can be implemented by a sole Beneficiary or in conjunction with Associated and/or Implementing Partners.

| <b>Participating Organisations</b>                    |                                   |  |                                  |
|---|-----------------------------------|--|----------------------------------|
| <b>Summary of Tasks</b>                               |                                   |  |                                  |
| <b>Role in the Doctoral or Postdoctoral Programme</b> | <b>Recruitment of researchers</b> | <b>Training and/or hosting of seconded researchers</b> | <b>Directly claim unit costs</b> |
| <b>Beneficiary</b>                                    | ✓                                 | ✓  | ✓                                |
| <b>Associated Partner</b>                             | x                                 | ✓  | x                                |
| <b>Implementing Partner</b>                           | ✓                                 | ✓  | x                                |

## 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 postdoctoral 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](#) <sup>(6)</sup>. 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 encouraged <sup>(7)</sup>.

All projects are encouraged to address the principles of the MSCA Green Charter <sup>(8)</sup> and implement measures to minimise the environmental footprint of their activities.

<sup>(6)</sup> The new European Charter for Researchers which also integrates the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers was published in December 2023, as [Annex II to the Council Recommendation of 18 December 2023 on a European framework to attract and retain research, innovation and entrepreneurial talents in Europe](#).

<sup>(7)</sup> 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 \(europa.eu\)](#)

<sup>(8)</sup> [MSCA Green Charter - Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions \(europa.eu\)](#). 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.

Typically, researchers are recruited and/or seconded within the partnership mentioned in the proposal. However, with the REA project officer's prior approval, it may be possible to add more Associated or Implementing Partners during project execution. Particular attention is paid to the quality of supervision<sup>(9)</sup> 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.

Researchers will be able to freely choose a research topic 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 may be possible to add more Associated or Implementing Partners during project execution.

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.

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<sup>(9)</sup> 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 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 can apply as Beneficiary to the COFUND scheme through the Funding and Tenders Portal.

An International European Research Organisation' (IERO) <sup>(10)</sup> 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. Both types of Partners (Implementing and Associated) 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.

If the Implementing and/or Associated Partners are not known at the time of application, these may be added during the lifetime of the project for both Doctoral and Postdoctoral schemes, with the REA project officer's prior approval.

- **Implementing Partners**

Implementing Partners are legal entities that can receive financial support from the Beneficiary and implement 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)

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<sup>(10)</sup> 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).

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 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](#) <sup>(11)</sup>.

Implementing Partners known at the proposal stage must be listed in 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 <sup>(12)</sup>.

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 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:

No letters of commitment are required at the evaluation stage for any partner (Associated or Implementing).

If the proposal is shortlisted for funding, **Implementing Partners identified in the proposal will be asked to provide a letter of commitment to ensure their active participation in the action before the grant signature. Without the provision of the required letters of commitment the participation of the Implementing Partner will not be taken into account.**

Associated Partners are not required to provide a letter of commitment however they must be included under the participants section in the Part A of the proposal as well as in Part B2 (section 5).

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<sup>(11)</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/horizon/guidance/programme-guide\\_horizon\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/horizon/guidance/programme-guide_horizon_en.pdf)

<sup>(12)</sup> For COFUND Postdoctoral Programmes outgoing phase, this restriction does not apply. The associated partner hosting the outgoing phase can conclude an additional employment contract with the researcher to ensure adequate medical/social insurance in the outgoing country.

### 3. ELIGIBILITY AND SUPPORTED RESEARCHERS

In each COFUND action, a minimum of three researchers must be recruited. **COFUND proposals proposing research training for less 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 <sup>(13)</sup> (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 degree <sup>(14)</sup> will be accepted only when it corresponds to a doctoral degree or if the researcher can demonstrate their 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 on the specificity of the proposed training. Normally, the duration of the programmes varies 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 3 months.**

- Doctoral Programmes:

The fellow must be employed for the duration of the researchers' individual fellowship.

- Postdoctoral Programmes:

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

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<sup>(13)</sup> Country of the main activity: the country where the researcher is physically based when carrying out the main activity and the country of the institution for which the main activity is performed (e.g., employer).

<sup>(14)</sup> 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.

## 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.

The 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/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.

## 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 [European Charter for Researchers](#) <sup>(15)</sup>. The vacancy notice (to be widely advertised, including on the [EURAXESS website](#)) must mention if the published rates include all employer's and employee's taxes and contributions. If possible, the gross salary (net salary + employee's taxes and contributions) should be published <sup>(16)</sup>.

Applicants may contact a supervisor during the application process, but any suggestion of preselection is to be avoided:

- a rationale for the contact should be included (e.g. it should be limited to scientific advice, to discuss the research being proposed, information about expertise/infrastructure available);
- supervisor should not be involved in drafting the proposal and;
- no approval (from either the proposed supervisor/host organisation) should be required as part of the submission process.

Supervisors should have no role in the selection/recruitment process or decision making.

Applicants, in their proposals to the MSCA COFUND call, should provide assurance that there will be no conflict of interest and no preselection in the proposed COFUND training programme's selection/recruitment process.

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<sup>(15)</sup> Previously this was included in the [Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers](#) but it has been integrated in the updated European Charter for Researchers dating to December 2023, published as [Annex II to the Council Recommendation of 18 December 2023 on a European framework to attract and retain research, innovation and entrepreneurial talents in Europe](#).

<sup>(16)</sup> The following FAQ link further clarifies the matter: [EU Funding & Tenders Portal \(europa.eu\)](#)

## 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, with no conflict of interest, must be involved at all stages of the evaluation process in the evaluation of each submitted application.** 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 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 of independent evaluators based in other countries, with no conflict of interest, for each submitted application, and at all stages of the evaluation process. 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 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) 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. Applicants must 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) and a narrative **Part B** composed of two separate PDF files (Part B1 and Part B2), which 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.

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).

In Part A, it is not required for the Beneficiary or the Associated Partners to fill in the following sections: researchers involved in the proposal; the list of up to five publications or significant infrastructure. The list of previous projects should be filled in only if applicable.

Information related to Implementing Partner organisations (if known) should be described in relevant sections of Part B2 (Section 5) including information related to their role, significant infrastructure and equipment and previous and current involvement in research and training programmes.

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/margin sizes allowed are embedded in the [template](#), which must be strictly respected by all applicants.

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.