Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions
Postdoctoral
Individual Fellowship - European Standard

Deadline 09/09/2020

Initial Information Session
General Overview
What am I applying for? Can I apply?

**European Standard Fellowship:**
- 12-24 month project
- Salary + 9.6k/year ‘research and travel budget’

**Eligibility: European Standard Fellowship**
- PhD (or 48 months full-time equivalent research experience)
- The researcher **cannot** have resided or carried out his/her main activity (work, studies, etc.) in the country of the beneficiary for **more than 12 months in the last three years**.

**Career restart:** < 3 years in last 5 years + 12 months break

**Reintegration:** < 3 years in last 5 years + move from ‘third country’
Why even try?  MSCA-IF mythbusting…

“Success rates are so low, it’s not worth the bother.”
- Rates seem low because MSCA-IF is the most open scheme there is
  → low barrier to application: no publications, no age limit, no PhD limit, no recommendation letters required

“It’s a political process, I know people with really good CVs who have been rejected.”
- MSCA-IF is the least political process there is!
  - ‘Bottom-up’ scheme → research field chosen freely by applicant
  - Decision purely on cut-off score
  - Need to demonstrate what you will learn → training grant
Ok, then what’s the process?

- **Guide for applicants**
- **Register/login, start application** & associate IST with application
  - (PIC: 996479740; Short name: IST Austria)
- Other info (acronym, summary, scientific area) can be updated later

Choose from 8 scientific areas:
- Chemistry (CHE)
- Social Sciences & Humanities (SOC)
- Economic Sciences (ECO)
- Information Sci & Engineering (ENG)
- Environment & Geosciences (ENV)
- Life Sciences (LIF)
- Mathematics (MAT)
- Physics (PHY)

To write:
- 10 page ‘Proposal’
  - +
  - 5 page ‘CV’
  - +
- 1 page ‘Institute Description’

**Template provided**
What do they want? What is this program for?

Purpose:

Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions (MSCA) aim to support the career development and training of researchers in all scientific disciplines…

The goal of the Individual Fellowships is to enhance the creative and innovative potential* of experienced researchers … in terms of skill acquisition through advanced training…

*Reviewer note:
The benefit of this project/fellowship to your career should be significant, not marginal

You need to develop (essentially):

- a 4/5 page scientific project
- + 5/6 page training plan to maximize your scientific potential (built on top of this project)
Is there a strategy? What have other people done?

As with any funding application, there are three main steps:

1. Consider the program purpose/goals when developing the project
2. Look at how the scoring is distributed across sections
3. Make the reviewer’s job easy (i.e. give them obvious answers to ALL their questions*)

*Reviewer note:
- …as clearly and concisely as possible, reviewers should not guess / assume anything that is not in the proposal
- be consistent in concepts and methodologies throughout

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>B-1 (10 pages)</th>
<th>Scoring</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Section 1: Excellence</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 2: Impact</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 3: Implementation</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<td>B-2 CV + Institute description</td>
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So, what do the reviewers need to answer?

Three main sections broken down into 10 sub-sections* (questions):

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<th>2. Impact</th>
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<td>Coherence and effectiveness of the work plan, including appropriateness of the allocation of tasks and resources</td>
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<td>Quality of the proposed measures to exploit and disseminate the project results</td>
<td>Appropriateness of the management structure and procedures, including risk management</td>
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<td>Quality of the supervision and of the integration in the team/institution</td>
<td>Quality of the proposed measures to communicate the project activities to different target audiences</td>
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Institute of Science and Technology Austria
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*Reviewer note:
- The core of the proposal for BOTH the researcher and the reviewer!!
- ALL sections the researcher must address are criteria the reviewer must assess
Questions?

Next:
Section 1 - Excellence
1. Excellence

1.1 Quality and credibility of the research/innovation project (level of novelty, appropriate consideration of inter/multidisciplinary and gender aspects)

- Introduction, state-of-the-art, objectives* and overview of the action
- Research methodology/approach
- Originality and innovative* aspects of the planned research
- Interdisciplinary aspects* (if relevant)
- Gender aspects (if relevant)

*Reviewer note:
- Consider both research (RO1, RO2, etc.) & training (TO1, etc.) objectives; also specific vs general objectives
- Innovative: technological content
- ‘Interdisciplinary aspects’ are always relevant!
1. Excellence

1.1 Quality and credibility of the research/innovation project (level of novelty, appropriate consideration of inter/multidisciplinary and gender aspects)

Common criticisms in Evaluation Reports:

- **state of the art** is not comprehensively presented (recent results missing).
- The specific aims are not presented in **sufficient detail**.
- The objectives are **too broad** for the given limited time.
- …**vague** in terms of working methods, theories and scientific hypotheses.
- The proposal does **not** present **sufficient data** to assess the advantages and drawbacks of the proposed methods.
- Possible issues linked to the **sex of the animals** were not sufficiently taken into account in the methodology.
1.2 Quality and appropriateness of the training and of the two way transfer of knowledge between the researcher and the host

Describe the training that will be offered

- How the experienced researcher will gain new knowledge during the fellowship at the hosting organization
- Transferable skills training: scientific + non-scientific (career-services.pages.ist.ac.at)
- Connect to training objectives!

Outline the transfer of your knowledge to the host

- Previously acquired knowledge and skills that the researcher will transfer to the host organization
1. Excellence

1.2 Quality and appropriateness of the training and of the two way transfer of knowledge between the researcher and the host

Common criticisms in Evaluation Reports:

• Description of training aspects too short (how should the goals be achieved?).

• Transferable skills are not significantly described (holistic development of the researcher is important, not only scientific development).

• Lack of a concrete training scheme and its phases.

• Lack of indicators/milestones to screen the training progress.

• Transfer of knowledge from researcher to the host is not clearly justified.
1. Excellence

1.3 Quality of the supervision and of the integration in the team/institution

Qualifications and experience of the supervisor

- Track record, main international collaborations, participation in projects, key publications, patents, …
- Experience in mentoring/supervising PhD students/postdocs

Hosting arrangements

- How will the fellow be integrated within the host organization?
- How do the interactions between supervisor, team and fellow take place? e.g. weekly group meetings*

*Reviewer note:
- Level of supervision should be adaptive to the needs of the project and the researcher
Common criticisms in Evaluation Reports:

• *The capacity of the supervisor to mentor and train* efficiently researchers of this level, especially with such ambitious goals and with little past experience, is not fully addressed.

• *The supervisor’s experience in mentoring people to scientific autonomy and independence* has not been sufficiently demonstrated.

• *The envisaged interactions of the researcher with the host team,* besides the supervisor, are not adequately described in the proposal.

• A *detailed plan for supervision* has not been adequately presented.
1. Excellence

1.4 Potential of the researcher to reach or re-enforce professional maturity / independence during the fellowship

Describe your **individual achievements** and **potential**

-> Explain why YOUR scientific background is (to a certain degree) unique

  • You have excellent potential
  • You are perfectly able to carry out the project
  • You would greatly benefit from this project (i.e. enhancing your skills/knowledge as a preparation for your next career step/ambitions)*

*Reviewer note:
- What do you expect from this fellowship? (e.g. new skill sets to acquire and/or apply, network(s) of contacts, gain expertise, scientific competence, visibility,...)
1. Excellence

1.4 Potential of the researcher to reach or re-enforce professional maturity / independence during the fellowship

Common criticisms in Evaluation Reports:

- Considering the researcher’s advanced level, **track record** is good, not outstanding.

- The CV does not provide sufficient evidence for the development of **scientific maturity** (mobility, awards, funding, teaching).

- The **independence** of the researcher is not well substantiated in the proposal. For instance, among 5 publications, he is first author of only two.

- Evidence that the candidate has the adequate **professional maturity** required for the project is not adequately demonstrated.

- …**potential** for reaching a position of professional maturity is not convincingly outlined.

- The leadership qualities are not supported by presentations to **national/international meetings** and by the applicant's ability to **receive independent grants/funding**.
Questions?

Next:
Section 2 - Impact
2. Impact

2.1 Enhancing future career prospects of the researcher after the fellowship

Focus on how the new competences and skills (as explained in 1.4) can make the researcher more successful in their long-term career.

- What is your professional career goal?
- Which new competences will be acquired and how will they affect your career path? *
- What is the expected impact of your proposed research on the scientific field and beyond (European society)?

*Reviewer note:
- How important is this fellowship, and what unique opportunities does it bring you to achieve your professional ambitions? or
- What additional career options will then be possible?
2. Impact

2.1 Enhancing future career prospects of the researcher after the fellowship

Common criticisms in Evaluation Reports:

- The proposal has not thoroughly indicated how the proposed work would add further to the [researcher’s] current level of professional maturity.

- Specific career goals are not clearly outlined which question the potential to reach a position of professional maturity after the fellowship.

- Although there is good potential for the applicant to acquire new knowledge and transferrable skills, the potential to specifically acquire new research skills is not sufficiently demonstrated*. For example, the applicant is already familiar with some of the research techniques proposed in this project.

- …does not provide sufficient details on the skills/competences to be acquired.

*Reviewer note:
- A critical point for criterion 1.4. The line between criteria 1.4 and 2.1 is clear in theory but not so much in practice.
2.2 Quality of the proposed measures to exploit and disseminate the project results

2.3 … to communicate the project activities to different target audiences

The project must reach a **broad public***, not only a broad scientific community (considered as essential)

Adequate measures to reach this goal are:

– Activity as a “Marie Skłodowska-Curie Ambassador”
– Participation in European Researchers’ Night
– Open house presentations, participation in science nights
– Interviews with newspapers, articles in local press

➢ These activities must be credible (e.g. associated w/ existing IST activities) and feasible (i.e. does not compromise your research and training)

➢ Try to be innovative, proactive and engaging!
2. Impact

2.2 Quality of the proposed measures to exploit and disseminate the project results
2.3 … to communicate the project activities to different target audiences

The project must reach a broad public*, not only a broad scientific community (considered as essential).

Adequate measures to reach this goal are:

- Activity as a „Marie Skłodowska-Curie Action“
- Participation in European Researchers’ Meetings
- Open house presentations, participation in science days and science weeks
- Interviews with newspapers, articles in local newspapers

➢ These activities must be credible (e.g. associated w/ existing IST activities) and feasible (i.e. does not compromise your research and training)
➢ Try to be innovative, proactive and engaging!

*Reviewer note:
- How will you bring the project outcomes/achievements to which non-expert community?
- How will you engage the general public?
2. Impact

2.2 Quality of the proposed measures to exploit and disseminate the project results
2.3 ... to communicate the project activities to different target audiences

Common criticisms in Evaluation Reports:

• Results dissemination is described only in a **generic** way.

• ... communication of the research activity to the **public** is limited in scope and its **effectiveness** in targeting diverse audiences is **not convincingly demonstrated**

• The outreach plan is rather vague and lacks detail of **how** the public would be engaged through each activity.

• The plan for outreach activities contains **only general possibilities**; their content is not related to specific outcomes of the research.

• Actions are not clearly defined and **not scheduled** during the project execution.

• Description of the exploitation of results is not properly addressed.
Questions?

Next:
Section 3 - Implementation
3. Implementation

3.1 Coherence and effectiveness of the work plan, including appropriateness of the allocation of tasks and resources

Short text providing the following information (structured/tabular)

- **Work Package(s)** description*
- List of major **Deliverables** (a distinct output)
- List of major **Milestones*** (control point to chart progress)
- Secondments (if applicable)

*Reviewer note:
- … including specific objectives, tasks and deliverables
  The project objectives must be achieved through the work plan. Refer to them whenever possible!!
- Don’t confuse deliverables & milestones!

**Helpful notation:**
WPX (X=Work package number)  
Task X.Y (Y=Task number)  
Deliverable X.Z (Z=Deliverable number)  
Milestone XX (XX=Milestone number)
3. Implementation

**Gantt chart:** Should provide a good overview of your work program, reflecting WPs, secondments (if applicable), training events and dissemination/public engagement activities etc.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Work Package</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Year 1</th>
<th>Year 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WP1</td>
<td>Management</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WP2</td>
<td>Data collection</td>
<td></td>
<td>D2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WP3</td>
<td>Field work</td>
<td>M3.1</td>
<td>D3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WP4</td>
<td>Research part x</td>
<td></td>
<td>M4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WP5</td>
<td>Research part y</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>WP6</td>
<td>Dissemination and communication</td>
<td>D6.1</td>
<td>D6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WP7</td>
<td>Secondments</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Reviewer note:*  
- also indicate the time period for dissemination and communication

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3. Implementation

3.2 Appropriateness of the management structure and procedures, including risk management

Project org. & management structure

- Experience (scientists and admin) in implementing funded projects; allocation of project tasks; progress monitoring mechanisms*

Risks to project objectives - incl. contingency plans to be put in place should risk occur*

- Risk evaluation, especially if the project depends on external parameters/ preconditions; outline alternatives in case of problems*

*Reviewer note:
- Highlight your role in the management of the project and relate it to criterion 1.4: relevant example of skill deployment and maturity
- **Contingency plans** are not part of the work plan, and should not be confused with mitigation plans, which minimize risks and may be incorporated in the work plan
- Providing a solid **risk assessment**, specific to your project, is crucial!! It is a powerful indicator of the feasibility of the project and its realistic conception
3. Implementation

3.3 Appropriateness of the institutional environment (infrastructure)

- **Short** description of the research infrastructure and tasks (a more detailed description will be done in the 1 page ‘Institute Description (Part B5))
- Explanation, why the research project can be implemented ideally at the host institution(s) (technical equipment, expert knowledge of the staff, existence of an interdisciplinary research group;…)
- Describe how the fellowship will be beneficial for both the researcher and the host organisation(s).
3. Implementation

Common criticisms in Evaluation Reports:

- *link between WPs and objectives has not been clearly documented.*
- **work packages are not clearly defined** and their names are **too generic.**
- The work plan is presented in terms of key events, but it is not clear *'how'* these will be managed, monitored and achieved.
- **no management plan:** not clear how progress will be monitored/measured.
- number of **person-months and resources allocated to each task/WP** is insufficiently described.
- Adequacy of **time allocated to WPs** is not convincingly demonstrated.
- The **list of tasks is too long** for a period of two years.
- description of risks is **weak ... contingency plans** insufficiently developed.
- The quality of the host's infrastructure is **not assessed against the specific needs** set out for the execution of the project.
Questions?

Next:
Summary
General hints for proposals

Research Project

• The project has to be highly **innovative and ambitious**, but **realistic**

• Describe the **state-of-the-art** carefully – reviewer comment..

• Objectives, methodology (**risks and contingent alternatives**) and work plan must be clear and consistent (content & time-wise)

Researcher

• Do not be (too) modest - your competitors won’t be

• Explain why **your** scientific background is (to a certain degree) unique (achievements and potential)
General hints for proposals

Research Project

• The project has to be highly **innovative and ambitious**, but **realistic**

• Describe the **state-of-the-art** carefully – review comment...

• Objectives, methods, and work plan must be clearly defined

State-of-the-art - reviewer comment:

• comprehensive and relevant
• highlighting the current challenges and significance
• providing the right context for the scientific objectives of the proposal

Researcher

• Do not be (too) modest

• Explain why your scientific background is (to a certain degree) unique (achievements and potential)
General hints for proposals

Training/Transfer of knowledge

• Adjust training and transfer of knowledge to the specific needs of the researcher and the host organization

• “Doing more with less” – focus on training activities you really need

• Acquire management and leadership skills

Impact

• Vagueness (and omission) is a killer – be specific (who, what, when – be consistent)

• Explain clearly the impact of the research and training on your career: new perspectives

• Public Engagement: Addressing a broad public is mandatory
General hints for proposals

Host Institution/Implementation

• Emphasize the host’s (relevant) experience in international projects and track record (patents, publications, # of projects, major achievements, …)
  – also their assistance/support in the realization of the project and in your integration into the team/institute

• Describe the (relevant) infrastructure (equipment, international collaborations, experience, …) and why this institution suits your project better than any other institution

• Describe the progress monitoring of your project
Even more general...

- Start writing the proposal **early enough**
- Write **in cooperation** with the supervisor/host institution
- Let others (also non-experts) read your proposal -> listen to them!
  - Your reviewers will not necessarily be experts in your specific field of research
  - Avoid too many acronyms or niche jargon
- Avoid spelling errors -> get help proofreading
- **Adhere closely** to the given format
Even more general…

- **Readability**: Make it easy to find the relevant sections in the text, use figures, emphasize by formatting (heavy type), separate sections,

- Do not overuse graphs etc.

- The **beginning** of your proposal must arouse curiosity and/or present an impressive challenge/problem, the **end** must be a harmonious final chord
  - these two paragraphs are of special importance in any kind of text!
  - for MSCA-IF, this may particularly apply to section 1.1 *Quality and credibility of the research/innovation project*, i.e. description of the actual research project (also 1.4, 2.1 on personal development)

- Do not underestimate any section of a proposal (even those with lower scoring)
  - **All parts of the proposal** are important for success
Reviewers appreciate...

- A carefully prepared, coherent proposal

- All sections addressed
  - as clearly and concisely as possible
  - in specific terms and sufficient detail
  - in a readable format, conformant with the guidelines, for both text and figures

- Consistency in all interrelated sections
Support is available!

Do not hesitate to contact the Grant Office early in the project development process:

grants@ist.ac.at