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OPINION

23 MAY 2024

Free Marie-Skłodowska Curie!

By Mattias Björnmalm and Manuel Heitor

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Brussels must give stellar early-career funding more autonomy, say Mattias Björnmalm and Manuel Heitor

Since their inception in 1996, the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions have supported more than 145,000 researchers. Eighteen have gone on to win Nobel prizes, including Emmanuelle Charpentier for her co-discovery of the Crispr gene-editing technology. Stefan Hell, who won the 2014 Nobel prize for chemistry, has called the MSCA Individual Fellowship he was granted in 1996 “a critical moment in my career”.

The programme has been particularly successful in promoting gender equality, with women making up over 42 per cent of MSCA fellows under Horizon 2020, way above the average EU research population.

Yet despite its achievements, the MSCA remains underappreciated and undervalued. It is often perceived as merely a mobility programme, but it is much more than that. It is also underfunded, with currently only one in every six high-scoring, excellent proposals winning support. This harms research in Europe and its ability to attract and retain world-class talent.

It is time to change this narrative and give the MSCA the recognition it deserves. For nearly three decades, the programme has been a trendsetter, providing immense value for Europe by funding the training, mobility, and career development of researchers at all stages of their careers. The scheme should be recognised as the EU's premier instrument for research training and research careers, and its full potential needs to be unlocked.

Positive impact

In its 2 May 2024 draft conclusions on the Horizon 2020 R&D programme, the Council of the EU acknowledged the MSCA's positive impact on the quality of science, training, career development, and working conditions of researchers. This recognition is important, but much more is needed.

The wider policy landscape is not without its tensions. Despite being fundamentally a bottom-up initiative, the programme sits within the main work programme of the European Commission; this translates top-down political priorities into funding calls, which sit uncomfortably with a bottom-up approach.

Current discussions in Brussels include potential structural changes to the MSCA. Some of these, such as integration into the Erasmus+ student mobility programme or concentration on specific fields of research, could damage the programme's impact. This underlines the need for informed debate about the future of the MSCA.

A position paper by Cesaer, published on 14 May 2024, includes a call to substantially boost the MSCA and its capacity to advance research careers. One key proposal is to enhance the research community's participation in the programme's governance, strategic planning and oversight.

Policymakers should consider enhancing the research community's active and independent participation in MSCA governance. This should encompass a new task force to foster research careers in Europe, recommended by the Council of the EU in May 2021, but still awaiting action.

A new council?

A 'Marie Skłodowska-Curie Council', inspired by the success of the European Research Council, could be set up to run the MSCA. It also needs a boost to its budget, which has been relatively modest, at around €1.3 billion annually, including UK contributions. Half of this

goes on large international networks of doctoral studentships, including those with industry. A third goes on postdoctoral fellowships. The programme also funds staff exchanges and co-funds doctoral and postdoctoral programmes, also with industry.

The research community needs to stimulate scientific activism throughout Europe to help citizens better understand the European values of research and innovation, including freedom of thought and the need for adequate incentives for research training and careers.

The MSCA has been a beacon for European research and a source of inspiration for early-career and young talent worldwide. It has fostered a sense of European values and collaboration among institutions and researchers, breaking down barriers and promoting a culture of shared knowledge.

It has been instrumental in attracting young talents to come to Europe to do research, advancing the frontiers of knowledge. It should be freed from constraints, corporate and nationalist interests in Brussels, and build on its success, so it can play an even larger role in the research landscape.

In conclusion, the MSCA is one of the EU's best funding instruments. Let's work together to unleash its full potential and give future generations more opportunities for freely chosen research, advanced training, and research careers in Europe.

Mattias Björnmalm is secretary-general of the Cesaer group of universities of science and technology. Manuel Heitor is Cesaer Envoy for Research Careers and a professor at the University of Lisbon Instituto Superior Técnico.

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