



COFUND Policy Report 2025

Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions

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COFUND Policy Report 2025

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1. Acknowledgements

This report is based on the outcomes of the Feedback to Policy exercise, which includes: feedback from around 100 beneficiaries through a questionnaire; feedback from Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) National Contact Points (NCPs) during consultation meetings; and best practice examples of and discussions with six beneficiaries during the COFUND policy event on 20 June 2024.

The entire Feedback to Policy exercise was organized by REA.A.4 in cooperation with DG EAC.C2.

The questionnaire for beneficiaries was prepared by REA in cooperation with DG EAC and consultation with NCPs. The MSCA NCPs from 22 countries as well as various staff members from REA and DG EAC participated in the on-line consultation meetings with NCPs and provided their views and expertise. During the policy event on 20 June 2024, six beneficiaries presented their `best practice` projects. They engaged in discussions with the NCPs present during the event.

REA would like to acknowledge the excellent work of Ms Alie Kwint, who was appointed as an external rapporteur, who followed carefully the whole consultation process and prepared this report.

In addition, our thanks go to all MSCA NCPs and COFUND beneficiaries who significantly contributed during the consultation process. Our special thanks go to the representatives of the six projects that participated during the COFUND policy event on 20 June 2024 and shared their experience and best practice in the management of their COFUND grants.

Last but not least, our thanks go to DG EAC colleagues, and especially to Ms Annelies Van de Ven for her support during the process and valuable comments to this document.

2. Acronyms

| | |
|----------------|--|
| AC | Associated Countries |
| CDP | Career Development Plan |
| CF | Cohesion Fund |
| DG EAC | Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture |
| EC | European Commission |
| ERDF | European Regional Development Fund |
| EU | European Union |
| FP7 | Seventh Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development |
| H2020 | Horizon 2020 |
| HE | Horizon Europe |
| MS | Member States |
| MSCA | Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions |
| MSCA DN | MSCA Doctoral Networks |
| MSCA PF | MSCA Postdoctoral Fellowships |
| NCP | National Contact Point |
| REA | European Research Executive Agency |
| R&I | Research and Innovation |

3. Foreword

I am pleased to present this insightful document, a testament to the dedication, collaboration, and meticulous work that went into its creation. This comprehensive report represents a significant achievement after more than six months of concerted effort of MSCA National Contact Points (NCPs) and beneficiaries and other stakeholders involved in the COFUND action, encapsulating their profound understanding and experiences.

From the initial brainstorming sessions to the final draft, this document has been characterized by a spirit of collaboration that transcends national borders and institutional constraints, highlighting the collective wisdom and expertise of our diverse contributors.

The insights gathered from NCPs, beneficiaries, and various stakeholders have been invaluable in framing the **challenges and opportunities** within the COFUND action. Their contributions have been pivotal in identifying key areas where the COFUND action can evolve to better meet the needs and aspirations of researchers across Europe and beyond.

I am particularly proud of how this document addresses the **nuances of the COFUND projects in all their diversity**, recognizing the crucial role of implementing and associated partners as well as the dedication of the coordinators. It highlights the necessity of **refining the funding conditions to better support all the entities involved**, which are integral to the successful recruitment and training of researchers.

The **recommendations** set forth in this document are **bold, forward-thinking, and grounded in practical experience**. They challenge existing paradigms and offer innovative pathways for advancing COFUND initiatives. For instance, the acknowledgment of the importance of **open, transparent, and merit-based recruitment processes** underscores a commitment to best practices as outlined in the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers. The emphasis on refining evaluation frameworks and enhancing researcher working conditions aligns with the highest standards set forth in the European Charter for Researchers.

Furthermore, this document courageously addresses **broader systemic issues**, such as the uneven participation across different countries and why regional and national entities might hesitate to engage with the COFUND action. These are complex issues that require strategic interventions, and the recommendations provided offer a clear lens through which to view these challenges and opportunities. The **transparency and flexibility** that the COFUND action embodies are celebrated here, but with a keen eye on areas for improvement that can lead to more effective and equitable outcomes, benefitting a wider geographic spread of participants across Europe.

In closing, this document is not just a reflection of past achievements but a **roadmap for the future**. It symbolizes a commitment to continuous improvement, to harnessing collective insights for crafting policies that are not only robust and effective but also inclusive and fair. I express my deepest appreciation to all who contributed to this Feedback to Policy report. It is through your expertise, dedication, and collaborative spirit that we can continue striving towards excellence and innovation in the COFUND action.

Together, let us embrace the boldness of these recommendations and use them as a map to evolve the COFUND action in the next multiannual financial framework.

Dr Begoña Arano

*Head of Department REA.A - Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions & Support to Experts
European Research Executive Agency*

4. Executive summary

The COFUND programme was introduced in 2007 as a new MSC Action in FP7. Since then, 17 calls for proposals have been published. COFUND programmes award fellowships to doctoral and postdoctoral researchers to focus on scientific and transferable training and career development and improved employability, both in the academic and non-academic sector.

Applicants submit proposals for new or existing doctoral or postdoctoral programmes with an impact on the enhancement of human resources in Research & Innovation (R&I) at regional, national or international level. Proposed programmes have a bottom-up approach, with flexibility/freedom for the researchers to define their research topic and choose their supervisor.

This report presents the outcomes of a Feedback to Policy exercise focusing on the COFUND action and provides recommendations at both a practical and a policy level. It is part of a broader Feedback to Policy effort in which the actions are reviewed based on feedback from key stakeholders in order to ensure that the MSCA remain fit for purpose.

4.1. Role of NCPs

The MSCA NCPs play a crucial role in providing guidance and training to future MSCA COFUND applicants, as well as beneficiaries and researchers who are already recipients of MSCA COFUND grants. Well-trained NCPs and informed applicants are key to promoting the programme, submitting strong proposals, and successfully implementing projects. NCPs are essential partners in developing strategies for communicating with the R&I community that could lead to more quality applications and broader sector participation.

4.2. Feedback to Policy Exercise

In Q3 2023, REA.A.4 (REA, MSCA and Citizens, COFUND and Support Activities) proposed a Feedback to Policy exercise; a stock-taking and gathering of policy evidence of good practices and lessons learnt, and of remaining issues and bottlenecks. The Feedback to Policy exercise was implemented through 3 steps: feedback from beneficiaries gathered through a survey, MSCA National Contact Points (NCP) consultation meetings, and a COFUND policy event on 20 June 2024. These 3 steps gathered input from relevant actors involved in the COFUND projects: beneficiaries, NCPs and staff from REA and EAC.

4.3. June 2024 COFUND Policy Event

During the event, several key aspects were highlighted:

- **Training** provided in COFUND projects **positively impacts the career paths and employability** of the participating researchers. The COFUND training programmes set up also impact other training programmes in the partner organisations.
- The main **co-funding sources** for COFUND projects are national, regional and institutional funding, but there are **wide discrepancies across Europe** with regard to the options and facility of applicants to avail of co-funding. Countries, regions and participating organisations that see the added value of COFUND for their own policies make co-funding more readily available.
- **COFUND projects** are felt to be **administratively burdensome**. Fear of making mistakes and potential issues during audits prevent potential beneficiaries from setting up COFUND projects.

- The **cascading funding mechanism** of COFUND was felt to have **both positive and negative aspects**.
- Best practice exists in terms of participation of the non-academic sector in COFUND projects, however the **inclusion of the non-academic sector** in COFUND consortia overall remains **difficult**.

4.4. Expected impact of COFUND

Finally, this report provides a complete analysis, stemming from the consultation process, policy event as well as existing statistical data, of **whether the COFUND action meets its expected impacts**. The current COFUND performance was evaluated against several expected impacts formulated for the overall MSCA or for the COFUND action.

- The **COFUND action fully supports the expected impact for doctoral candidates and postdoctoral researchers** facilitating acquisition of deeper and more diverse skills and competences, leading to improved employability and career prospects in both the academic and non-academic sectors.
- **COFUND has NOT had a structuring effect** on the research landscapes of the participating beneficiaries. Funded individual beneficiaries find the programme impactful, but the lack of wide geographic participation means that after nearly two decades the structuring effect has not been reached in the vast majority of countries.
- The **COFUND proposal template requires relatively little information on scientific excellence** from the applicants, **contrary to the general MSCA principle of excellence**.
- The **significantly lower EU contribution** towards the salaries of COFUND researchers compared to MSCA DN/PF, and the **lack of country correction coefficient** in COFUND **undermine the action**.
- **COFUND has partially achieved the aim of encouraging international, inter-sectoral and interdisciplinary mobility**, and establishing sustainable collaboration between academic and non-academic organisations. Current **participation from the non-academic sector**, both as beneficiaries and as recruiting implementing partners, is **relatively low¹ compared to other MSCA actions**.
- The **COFUND project set-up is perceived as complex**, off-putting to potential applicants, and hampering any structuring effect on the research landscapes across Europe. Where **formally all COFUND projects are mono-beneficiary, in reality more than a third of projects are multi-beneficiary**, sometimes with more than 50 partners. This does not do justice to the important role of implementing partners in the projects, who are also not statistically visible.

¹ For associated partners the data is available in the structured format only as of the 2021 HE call.

5. Chapter 1 – Background and methodology

5.1. Objective of the policy report

The **objective of this policy report** is to evaluate whether the COFUND action meets its expected impact and propose measures for a potential successor in the next Framework Programme.

5.2. COFUND in the three Framework programmes

The COFUND programme was **introduced in November 2007** (FP7) to increase “the European-wide mobility possibilities for training and career development of experienced researchers, in line with the objectives set out in the activity heading “Life-long training and career development”, thus boosting its overall impact”. **A total of 17 calls for proposals** have followed since, **throughout FP7, H2020 and HE**.

Looking at the COFUND call published in 2024², the **main aims and objectives of the COFUND action have not changed significantly**: the call “co-finances new or existing doctoral programmes and postdoctoral fellowship schemes with the aim of spreading the best practices of the MSCA including international, inter-sectoral and interdisciplinary research training, as well as international and cross-sectoral mobility of researchers at all stages of their career”.

Over three framework programmes and 17 years, the action has remained largely the same. In practice, MSCA COFUND provides complementary funding for doctoral or postdoctoral programmes managed by entities established in EU Member States (MS) and Associated Countries (AC). COFUND programmes award fellowships to researchers to focus on scientific and transferable training and career development and improved employability, both in the academic and non-academic sector. Importantly, the funded COFUND projects must allow the applicants to freely choose their supervisor and project; COFUND will not support recruitment schemes to fill regular research vacancies. COFUND programmes must run an open, merit-based competition for the applying researchers and be founded on international peer review. Host organisations must offer adequate working conditions to the fellows, in line with the principles set out in the European Charter for Researchers. Fellows must be appointed on a regular employment contract unless there is a legal obstacle in which case stipends are permitted.

COFUND was and still is a **mono-beneficiary action**. In FP7, proposals could be submitted by ‘single organisations established in a Member State of Associated Country, managing and funding fellowship programmes’. The collaboration with a wider set of partners, including from the non-academic sector, for hosting the researchers, secondment opportunities or training was foreseen from 2014 in the H2020 COFUND action. Such partnerships were considered exceptional and had to be covered by specific partnership agreements. In HE, ‘**participating organisations**’ are of two types: those which recruit COFUND researchers are referred to as ‘**implementing partners**’, while those providing training or secondment opportunities without recruiting the researchers are termed ‘**associated partners**’.

In FP7, the EU contribution was fixed at 40% of the fellowship costs for eligible researchers, with a maximum overall of EUR 5m to a single applicant entity for one call. In H2020, the EU contribution was no longer fixed, and the maximum overall contribution was set to EUR 10m. In FP7 only postdoctoral COFUND projects were funded, in H2020 and HE doctoral COFUND

² Horizon Europe Work Programme 2023-2025 MSCA

projects are also funded. A mandatory Career Development Plan for each fellow was introduced in 2021.

In the past 17 years, **484 COFUND projects³ have been funded**. Of these, 305 are from H2020 and HE calls⁴. During H2020 and HE, a total of 971 implementing partners/partner organisations that recruited the researchers, were or still are involved in these projects⁵.

The **mobility criterion** still exists but was simplified⁶.

Approximately **16,000 researchers** have received training in these projects since 2007, and a total budget of **EUR 1.4 billion** has been spent by the EC on the COFUND projects to date⁷.

5.3. 3-step Policy Feedback

In Q3 2023, REA.A.4 proposed a Feedback to Policy exercise; a stock-taking and gathering of policy evidence of good practices and lessons learnt, and of remaining issues and bottlenecks.

The exercise was set up following a 3-step approach:

1. Feedback from beneficiaries (December 2023 and January 2024).

A questionnaire was prepared for current beneficiaries of COFUND projects. The objective of the questionnaire was to identify good practices as well as shortcomings for future improvement, and to identify the impact of COFUND. More than 100 responses were received from the 150 beneficiaries contacted.

2. NCP consultation meetings (March and April 2024).

The aim was for NCPs to engage in discussion with REA staff and with each other on a variety of topics related to the implementation of COFUND projects in their countries and in general. A list with topics and questions was sent to NCPs prior to the meetings; this list was meant for the NCPs to start thinking about the topic and to consult beneficiaries where relevant. Five groups of NCPs were formed, where NCPs from countries with similar participation in the COFUND action were put together. This approach encouraged all NCPs to participate in the discussions. There was not a pre-defined agenda for the meetings, and NCPs were free to bring up any point they felt was important. NCPs from 22 countries⁸ participated in these meetings, and various REA and EAC staff members contributed to the consultation meetings.

3. COFUND policy event (20 June 2024).

NCPs were invited, as well as representatives of 6 successful COFUND projects. The event provided the opportunity for NCPs to discuss with beneficiaries directly, and to learn from best practices. During this day, held in Covent Garden in Brussels, 6 topics that were distilled from the beneficiaries' feedback and NCP consultation meetings, were further discussed. NCPs were assigned to 1 of 6 conversation groups, based on similar participation in the COFUND action. Via a rotation system, all groups of NCPs discussed with all 6 COFUND beneficiaries on all 6 topics, totalling 36 meetings of 40 minutes. Each meeting started with a short presentation by the project beneficiary and was followed by discussions with the NCPs. REA staff members moderated each meeting.

³ For HE, only calls 2021-2023 are included

⁴ 7 calls of H2020, first 3 calls of HE

⁵ For FP7, the data are not available in the structured format

⁶ In FP7, there were 3 mobility rules in COFUND: Outgoing, Incoming and Reintegration mobility rule

⁷ Work Programme budget for the 2007-2023 COFUND calls

⁸ Austria, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Tunisia, Turkey, United Kingdom

This report addresses in chapter 2 the 6 topics that were discussed at the NCP consultation meetings and during the COFUND policy event:

1. Training;
2. Evaluation, selection and recruitment process;
3. Co-funding sources;
4. Administrative support;
5. Interdisciplinarity with focus on industry; and
6. Dissemination and communication of research results.

A seventh section has been added for additional topics.

6. Chapter 2 – Exchange of experience and good practice

This chapter is set up following the main topics that were discussed during the policy event on 20 June 2024. It also presents best practices presented by beneficiaries and provides feedback from beneficiaries and NCPs.

6.1. Training

Doctoral programmes offer research training activities to doctoral candidates, and lead to the award of a doctoral degree in at least one EU Member State or HE Associated Country. The training activities should be based on the EU Principles on Innovative Doctoral Training. Postdoctoral programmes fund individual advanced research training and career development fellowships for postdoctoral researchers.

In both programmes, training should include scientific training as well as training in key transferable skills and competences. A Career Development Plan must be jointly established by the supervisor and each recruited researcher upon recruitment, including research objectives, the researcher's training and career needs. The quality of supervision and mentoring arrangements as well as career guidance is important⁹.

Best practices presented by beneficiaries

During the policy event, the IRB Barcelona presented best practices on training in the framework of their COFUND doctoral programme [IRB DREAM](#).

The project introduced personal Career Development Plans (CDP). They are revised each year by supervisors and career advisors, who verify advancements in fellows' research, and recommend relevant supplementary training. With the COFUND project, IRB Barcelona pilots improvements in terms of training and selection, and CDPs have been extended throughout the IRB PhD community. The creation of CDPs begins at the earliest stage, upon joining a host institution. With the tailored support from an academic office, researchers receive personalised training recommendations based on their research project, PhD needs, and the type of career they would like to pursue in the future.

The training programme is flexible: training offered at the start of the project is on topics selected by IRB Barcelona, training offered in later stages is based on the needs of the fellows. Training follows the triple 'i' approach, and focuses on international, intersectoral and interdisciplinary elements. The training offered includes an induction course (presentation of

⁹ MSCA Work Programme 2023 - 2025

facilities, available support, lab equipment, retreats, weekly seminars in the institute, and training offered by their partners). Training is provided by both internal and external trainers. Mandatory training is financed from the Academic Office budget, while specific, niche sessions use funds from associated partners or companies. External trainers are involved such as speakers from industry, spinoffs, members of the associated partners, other entrepreneurs, individuals working in the pharma industry or clinical trials. The institute indicates a minimum, obligatory number of training hours. Even though IRB launched their e-learning platform based on Moodle, face-to-face meetings proved to be the most effective training strategy. Each training activity is subject to review by participants in order to improve upcoming initiatives and further COFUND projects.

Secondments are mandatory for all fellows and the Institute highly encourages that they are taken during the first two years. Depending on the needs of fellows and potential supervisors, scopes and places of secondments are defined at an early stage. For the next COFUND initiative, IRB plans to impose international secondments. Intersectoral secondments will not be mandatory, as they may not be relevant for all fellows. Training is used to add intersectoral and interdisciplinary elements to those projects where intersectoral and/or interdisciplinary secondments are not built in.

In terms of support for the Doctoral Candidates, in addition to support given by supervisors, IRB arranged a mentorship programme, in which the fellows are paired with postdoctoral researchers for advice and guidance throughout their PhD. PhD retreats are organized, with social/networking activities to strengthen the PhD network. Furthermore, the IRB launched mental health initiatives.

The institute published a call for supervisors, to ensure their commitment. It was challenging to convince the PIs of the importance of transferable skills training and in preparing the Doctoral Candidates for careers in industry. Supervisors were involved in the preparation of the project, e.g. by proposing research topics, through using their contacts for secondment opportunities and for training. Furthermore, IRB arranged a structured mentorship programme for doctoral candidates.

Feedback from beneficiary consultations

Feedback from the beneficiaries shows that **COFUND does have positive effects on researcher career paths and employability**. COFUND beneficiaries indicated a variety of reasons as to how training in the COFUND project impacted other training programmes at their institutions. For example, COFUND actively stimulated interdisciplinary training (67% of respondents), contributed to global attractiveness, visibility and reputation of the partners (61%), supported the partners in drawing and retaining skilled researchers in their organisations (60%) and allowed spill-over of skills development to other training programmes (59%). The COFUND programmes were also considered to have an important impact on researcher career paths & global and intersectoral employability. A total of 73% of the respondents indicated that the COFUND project provided the researchers with new skills, leading to a career boost (68%), increased networking (61%), and global employability (45%). More specific acquired skills that were mentioned are networking prowess, innovative mindsets, academic excellence, and industry leadership. Only 22% indicated they believe that COFUND alumni have secured successful jobs more swiftly compared to other researchers in their organization.

A similar question was asked to beneficiaries of postdoctoral projects. Beneficiary respondents indicated they believe the COFUND project, more than a similar national project, contributes to deeper and more diverse skills development (73%), to improved employability and career prospects (68%), to networking and communication (61%), and to innovative and interdisciplinary approaches (56%).

6.2. Evaluation, Selection and Recruitment process

The COFUND Scope in the Work Programme specifies that the selection procedure for both, doctoral and postdoctoral candidates must be open, transparent and merit-based, in line with the European Charter and Code for Researchers¹⁰ In addition, the selection procedure for postdoctoral candidates must include a transparent international peer review process.

Best practices presented by beneficiaries

Ca' Foscari University of Venice (UNIVE) presented best practices in Evaluation, Selection and Recruitment in the framework of their COFUND Postdoctoral programme [GLOBAL AT VENICE \(G@V\)](#). During the application phase, candidates were allowed to propose bottom-up projects with no predefined topics. However, it was obligatory to align with one or more Research for Global Challenges Institutes at the university to promote an interdisciplinary, challenge based and mission-oriented approach to research.

UNIVE created a dedicated website for prospective and existing fellows to use, including application deadlines, relevant guidelines, evaluation criteria, FAQ section, expression of interest for professors as potential supervisors, thus allowing applicants to get in touch with them early in the process. The website proved useful for showcasing successful fellows, their progress, and publications. Applications had to be submitted via an online proposal submission tool that was integrated into the website and the online application scheme was created in conjunction with an experienced external company, which was also responsible for matching evaluators to proposals. The evaluation and selection process was set up as follows:

Eligibility check

Scientific peer review. Each proposal was assessed by three remunerated evaluators, one of them acting as a dedicated rapporteur. Utilising a wide database shared by the Ministry, the management team ensured gender and nationality balance among evaluators. For the second call, it was not possible to reapply with the same project if the first proposal scored less than 70%. Evaluation criteria included excellence, impact and implementation. All applicants received feedback on their proposals by distributing the evaluation reports with strengths, weaknesses, and a final score.

A list of applicants to be invited for interview was compiled, with twice the number of applicants as positions available.

Ethics check. Before each interview, applications were screened by the Ethics Committee, which reported any issues to the Scientific Advisory Board (six professors from the University, and six external, international experts).

Interviews were conducted by members of the Scientific Advisory Board. There were three crucial criteria during the interviews: expertise, added value and motivation.

A redress procedure was available to candidates during any of the processes, however, no candidate used this measure.

Other individuals involved in the evaluation and selection process were from the management team and staff from their Research Office.

The start date of fellowships was flexible to allow fellows to finalise their obligations and relocate at their ease. Employed fellows received a three-month salary advance to facilitate the start of their project.

¹⁰ Principles and requirements of the Charter and Code | EURAXESS

Discussions evolved around the possible role of supervisors in the evaluation and selection process. In G@V, applicants were invited to approach a potential supervisor listed on the website or select a potential supervisor of their own choice. Applicant and potential supervisor could discuss items about the research environment (available infrastructure etc) only. It was made very clear to supervisors that they would not be engaged in the evaluation and selection process. Supervisors were aware that they could receive multiple fellows, but this did not turn out to be the case. A policy for cases where there was a mismatch between fellow and supervisor was in place.

Lessons learned from G@V now serve as best practice at the University, particularly in terms of recruitment.

Feedback from beneficiary consultations

Beneficiaries indicated that **the evaluation, selection and recruitment process of the COFUND project allowed to promote best MSCA practices in the recruitment and employment process of the researchers**, both on institutional and national levels. A total of 63% of beneficiary respondents indicated that through the COFUND project, mobility procedures at their institution have accelerated. Nearly half (49%) indicated that evaluation frameworks were refined (alignment with the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers: transparency, composition and organization of selection committees, evaluation criteria, equal opportunity, gender and other diversity aspects). The same percentage (49%) of beneficiaries indicated that they enacted improved working and employment conditions for researchers, aligning with the standards set forth in the European Charter for Researchers. Beneficiaries mentioned researcher retention (36%) and a competitive selection (40%) as major challenges for their COFUND projects.

Feedback from NCP consultations

The freedom and flexibility with regard to the number of fellows (doctoral or postdoctoral) that can be recruited is appreciated by stakeholders. This allows them to adapt the size of the COFUND project to what is feasible and desirable for a host organization. NCPs equally appreciate the fact that in doctoral COFUND projects, fellows can be recruited for four years, corresponding to the duration for obtaining a PhD degree in many European countries.

A **main challenge** that was discussed by NCPs is the fact that there is insufficient clarity regarding the degree to which **supervisors may be involved in the application stage** within a COFUND project. While in any 'normal' recruitment process of PhD candidates or postdoctoral researchers, supervisors are involved in the proposal preparation, it is not clear whether this is allowed in a COFUND project. Applicant – supervisor collaboration at application stage would allow the applicant to engage with the supervisor to ensure the right match between applicant and supervisor, and with the host institution. It should be noted that the practice of applicant-supervisor collaboration takes place in the MSCA PF action.

REA clarified the matter and made sure that the following approach is communicated to the experts evaluating the COFUND proposals: Applicants may contact a supervisor during the application process but a rationale for the contact should be specified (e.g. for scientific advice, to discuss the research being proposed). The supervisor should not be involved in drafting the proposal and no approval (from either the proposed supervisor/host organisation) is required as part of the submission process. In addition, all proposals should make clear that the process is open, transparent, merit-based, impartial and equitable as set out in the European Charter for Researchers.

A related issue and source of confusion is the **involvement of supervisors in the selection phase**. Whilst NCPs appreciate, and applicants are well aware and agree, that the selection procedure must be open, transparent and merit-based, it remains an important point of confusion. REA has also clarified this point and made sure that the following approach is communicated to the experts evaluating the COFUND proposals: Supervisors should have no

role in the recruitment process (or else a very defined role, e.g., in the later interview stage) 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 recruitment process.

NCPs report on **problems with the definition of the salaries for the recruited researchers**. Salaries are based on the COFUND allowance which consists of the EU allowance that dictates the minimum remuneration for the benefit of the researchers, often increased with co-funding to reach a competitive salary level at regional or national level for the researchers. Applicants are requested to clearly indicate the total amount of the researcher's salary (EU allowance plus co-funding) including the employer's contribution to social security as well as the employee's tax and social security contributions¹¹. However, for the recruited researchers, it is often not clear that the total COFUND allowance that is advertised includes both employer's taxes for social security and income tax. These will be deducted before the recruited researcher receives their net salary. The impact of these taxes on the salary of the recruited researcher differs per country due to differences in national legislation. This leads to confusion and disappointment for recruited fellows, and hence for their host institutions and the NCPs.

A discussion with NCPs unfolded about the expected success rate following the evaluation and selection procedure implemented in several COFUND projects. Despite the beneficiary/consortium's best efforts, a **low number of applications were often received for open recruitment calls** in COFUND projects, which in turn sometimes lead to a high success rate for applicants within a given COFUND project. Likewise, in some cases there are ample applicants for the available posts, but a limited number of which reach the excellence threshold of the recruiting institution.

NCPs report feedback from beneficiaries who find the expected content in the proposal for the **description of the evaluation and selection process for individual researchers too demanding**. For example, the expectation that interviews always be included is a barrier, even though they are now part of almost every evaluation and selection process in COFUND proposals. Similarly, the expected content for the description of **recruitment processes is considered too demanding**. Applicants struggle to find the right level of detail and 'extra's' in their COFUND proposal.

6.3. Co-funding sources

MSCA COFUND co-finances new or existing doctoral programmes and postdoctoral fellowship schemes. In practice, MSCA COFUND provides complementary funding for doctoral or postdoctoral programmes managed by entities established in EU Member States or Horizon Europe Associated Countries. The EU contribution for MSCA COFUND will take the form of unit contributions, and thus depends on the number of units (person-months) requested for the project. The EU contribution is limited to EUR 10m per beneficiary per call. There is no minimum budget for COFUND projects (but there is a minimum of 3 researchers to be recruited).

Funding synergies with Cohesion policy funds and the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) are strongly encouraged. Seals of Excellence will be awarded to applications with a total score equal to or higher than 85%, but which cannot be funded due to lack of budget available to the call¹².

¹¹ MSCA COFUND proposal template 2024

¹² MSCA Work Programme 2023-2025

Best practices presented by beneficiaries

During the policy event, the Greater Paris mathematical community—FSMP (Fondation Sciences Mathématiques de Paris covering all laboratories in Centre/Paris North), FMJH (Fondation Mathématique Jacques Hadamard in Paris South) and Fédération Bézout (in Paris East)—presented best practices on co-funding of their COFUND Postdoctoral programme [MathInGreaterParis](#). MathInGreaterParis is one of four COFUND programme of the FSMP. Earlier COFUND projects were MathInParis with 40 PhD Fellows and MathInParis2020 with 40 PhD fellows, and most recently, the foundation launched MathPhdInFrance with 48 PhD fellows.

The Foundation was created in 2006, as a non-profit organization under private law, bringing together almost 1800 mathematicians at all levels of research and education: Master, doctoral and postdoctoral fellowships. With only seven employees, the foundation has 14 laboratories and excellence chairs in Paris. Labs and universities receive a yearly budget from the French state.

The foundation has an extensive, mainly academic network. Private companies constitute a small fraction of their connections and they do not contribute financially – their involvement is limited to providing secondment opportunities. Of the total grant, one third of the funding is provided through the networks of partners, and two-thirds is provided by the EC. In addition, universities/partners offer in-kind contributions, such as access to facilities. Currently, French universities avoid raising money from the private sector, particularly for research, to ensure their independence.

In terms of the budget structure, the largest part is the COFUND allowance, plus a mobility allowance, research and travel costs (mainly paid by laboratories), training, management costs, and indirect costs.

Feedback from beneficiary consultations

Beneficiaries indicated that the **levels of co-funding as percentage of the total budget ranged between 30 to above 60%**, with most beneficiaries providing co-funding between 50-60% of the total budget. Beneficiaries indicated that in most cases, the total grant ranged between EUR 1-5m, but smaller and larger total grants were also reported. Co-funding sources indicated are institutional funding (74%), national funding (31%), regional funding (28%) and private funding (18%). Funding from Erasmus+, ERDF and CF, was occasionally reported.

The majority of the beneficiaries that responded to the questionnaire indicated that the funding was sufficient for MSCA researcher remuneration, and that funding from external sources was sufficient to cover institutional costs. Nevertheless, 1 in 5 respondents indicated that funding for institutional costs from external sources was insufficient.

Feedback from NCP consultations

NCPs welcome the flexibility in the co-funding rate, that was introduced in H2020, as this allows to provide for the different needs of projects. Nevertheless, the **amount of co-funding** that beneficiaries (and consortium partners) must contribute **can still be very substantial**.

6.3.1. Access to Co-funding Sources

There is an **enormous difference between European countries** with regards to the options and facility of applicants to avail of national, regional or institutional funding **for co-funding in COFUND projects**. It is clear that **having access to sources** that can provide sufficient co-funding is of **paramount importance for countries' potential participation in COFUND**. In some countries (e.g. France, Spain, Ireland), national and/or regional funding is available for use in COFUND projects. In these countries, regional /national governments are committed to

the action, with legislation permitting or even encouraging the use of regional/national funding for COFUND projects.

In Spain, for example, regional and national governments set up new research centres and use the COFUND action to double the number of researchers, which in turn contributes to regional and national policies. Other NCPs (e.g. Germany) report that universities see the COFUND programme as a mechanism for strategically building capacity in certain areas, as an instrument to improve internal regulations and as a means to support the universities' strategies in the field of researcher training. As a consequence, these universities relatively easily provide matching funding for COFUND projects.

A specific case here are university alliances, e.g. European University initiatives, or other collaborations, e.g. excellence clusters. Universities in these alliances are already committed to working together, which could facilitate strategically bringing together their funds to generate the co-funding for a COFUND project. However, in the context of the mono-beneficiary COFUND projects, participation of the alliances that are multinational has proven to be problematic.

The possible financial contribution of private partners within a consortium was briefly discussed.

6.3.2. Seal of Excellence

In **two countries** (Slovenia, Czechia), **the Seal of Excellence scheme is used to fund COFUND applications** that did not receive EU-funding. The Seal of Excellence is a certificate of internationally recognized excellence of research projects and allows countries to (co-)finance projects from national funds without having to repeat evaluation procedures. The impact of such funding is important, as it is an additional motivation for research institutions to start with the preparation for a COFUND project. However, there are obstacles as well: **National law does not always allow funding of COFUND proposals without changing the content of the proposal.**

6.3.3. Cohesion Policy Funds

The MSCA WP 2023–2025 states that funding from EU programmes such as the Cohesion policy funds may be used for co-funding, and funding synergies with Cohesion policy funds (incl. the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), and the Cohesion Fund (CF)) are encouraged. A number of countries show a willingness to use Cohesion policy funds to create or contribute to the co-funding budget that must be put together for a COFUND project. In these countries, a legislative framework was created at regional and/or national level and institutions know how to use it. **In practice however, the use of Cohesion policy funds for co-funding of COFUND projects has proven extremely challenging to implement, and the use of Cohesion policy funds is very limited for COFUND.** NCPs find the **encouragement to use European cohesion funds somewhat misleading** as in practice it presents difficulties. NCPs mentioned different procedures and timescales for European Cohesion Funds, difficult negotiations with the authorities in Brussels and administrative and financial formal issues.

6.3.4. Lack of Regional, National or Institutional Funding

The main constraint for many potential applicants is the lack of regional, national or institutional funding schemes they have access to, or **too many constraints for using such money for a COFUND project.** Regional and national funding agencies are not always (fully) aware of the existence of and the benefits of the COFUND action for the implementation of their regional and national R&D strategies. Regional and national funding agencies could

be a beneficiary in a project, with implementing partners recruiting the researchers. However, these agencies are not the classic 'target groups' for many NCPs to approach and promote the programme. Similarly, potential applicants in many countries have **difficulties to allocate and obtain funding on institutional level**. Many universities have the resources, but they are already allocated, and 'free money' is extremely limited. On a practical level, in many universities the decision to make money available for a COFUND project lies with the top management which must be committed to the COFUND programme, by fully understanding how the COFUND programme can be used as an instrument for the strategic development of the university, in terms of researcher recruitment, internationalization etc. It takes time and persistence (and a motivated volunteer) to convince top management to make such a strategic decision. As above, university top management is not the classic target group for many NCPs.

Matching funding could also be secured from other sources, such as from industry partners in the consortium, philanthropic sources, charities etc. Possibilities to obtain funding through these sources is highly dependent on the research topic. The process of collecting funds on project-level is difficult in terms of getting everyone on board and understanding the funding mechanisms of COFUND.

6.3.5. MSCA Salary Levels

Some countries mention the relatively high salary level in their countries as a hurdle for securing sufficient national co-funding. With the EU providing a fixed salary level per person-month, high-salary countries first must top-up this amount to reach a competitive salary before allocating further co-financing to other budget lines. **This poses the question of whether having one minimum salary level in the COFUND action is equitable given the variety of countries in Europe.**

The introduction of a country correction coefficient for COFUND, as in MSCA DN and PF actions, could alleviate this problem, which would facilitate putting together the 'own contribution' from participants, and thus lead to an increase in participation from a number of countries.

Note that **the minimum requirements for salaries of doctoral candidates and postdoctoral researchers in COFUND** projects and provided through EU funding, **differ from EU funding** provided for the salaries offered in MSCA DN (doctoral candidates) and in MSCA PF projects (postdoctoral researchers).

The living allowance in MSCA DN projects is EUR 4010/person month adjusted with the country correction coefficient (plus EUR 710/person month mobility allowance and if applicable EUR 660/person month family allowance). In a doctoral COFUND project, the monthly gross remuneration must be not lower than EUR 3300/person month (EU contribution).

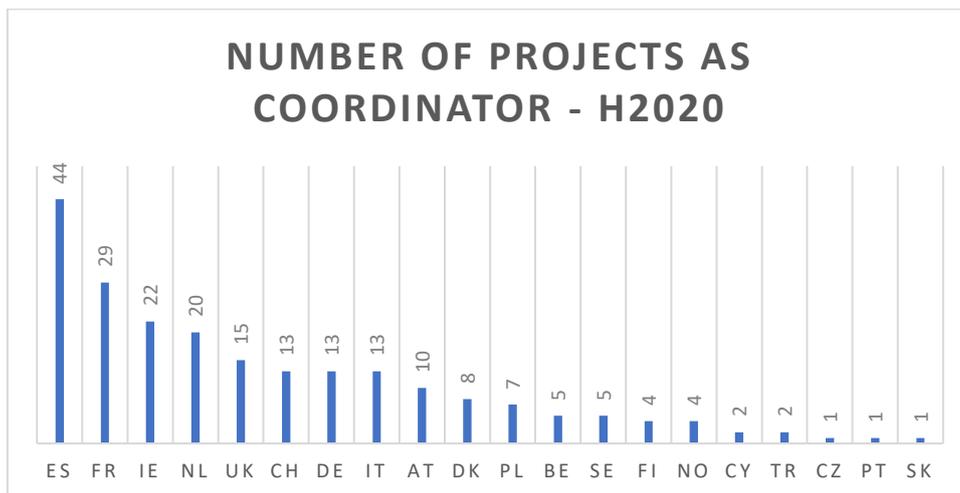
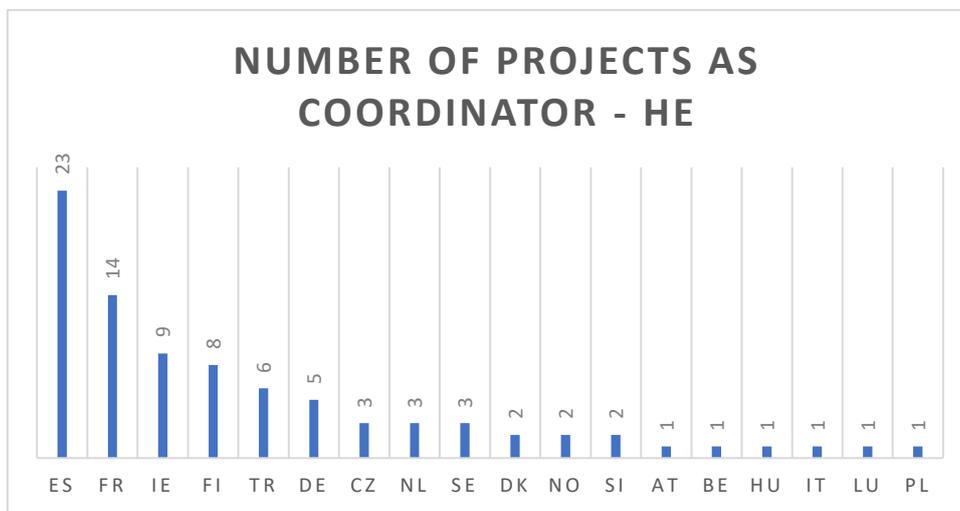
The living allowance in MSCA PF projects is EUR 5990/person month adjusted with the country correction coefficient (plus EUR 710/person month mobility allowance and if applicable EUR 660/person month family allowance). In a postdoctoral COFUND project, the monthly gross remuneration must be not lower than EUR 4700/person month¹³. COFUND applicants are invited to top up the provided EU funding to make salaries competitive, but this is not compulsory. It is often difficult for reviewers to evaluate whether salaries offered in COFUND projects are competitive, due to the lack of detail or difficulties identifying the gross and net salaries for the recruited researchers.

¹³ MSCA Work Programme 2023-2025

6.3.6. Uneven Geographic Participation

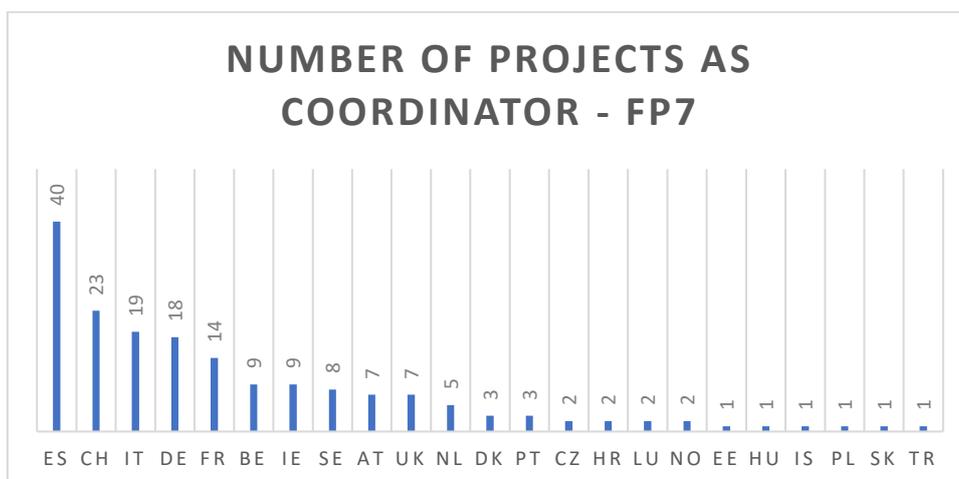
Throughout the years, and for reasons outlined above, there is a **very uneven spread of participation in the COFUND programme**. Between 2007 and 2023¹⁴, a number of EU MS have never coordinated a COFUND project: e.g. Bulgaria, Greece, Malta and Romania. Of the HE AC, only Iceland, Norway, Turkey and the UK have coordinated one or more COFUND projects. There are also EU Member States that have coordinated large numbers of COFUND projects, such as Spain, France, Italy and Ireland.

The three graphs below show the number of projects as coordinator per country and per framework programme¹⁵. **A third (34%) of all funded projects are coordinated by two Member States, Spain and France:**



¹⁴ Data provided by REA

¹⁵ Source: CORDA. Data for HE are for the first 3 calls, 2021, 2022 and 2023



In some countries, COFUND is simply not the preferred way of spending efforts and money on research and training. **Efforts are rather spent on schemes that offer 100% funding** (e.g. MSCA DN and PF) than on schemes for which co-funding is needed. Alternatively, researchers prefer to apply for national funding which in general is easier to apply for than European funding.

It is clear that having access to sources that can provide sufficient co-funding is of paramount importance. All research organisations from all MS/HE AC should be in the position to provide the co-funding for COFUND projects. Having access to funding necessitates a wide array of sources to provide the co-funding required in COFUND projects, so that future applicants from across Europe and from across disciplines are able to apply to and participate in participate in the COFUND action.

A similar facility of access to co-funding across European countries could potentially lead to a similar and more even spread of participation in the COFUND programme. This, in turn, would support the expected impacts of structuring training and research landscapes across Europe (see also above), enhancing the quality and sustainability of research training, increased global visibility and reputation of participating organisations and increased contribution of the participating organisations to the local, regional and/or national socio-economic ecosystems.

6.4. Administrative support

The beneficiaries must inform the researchers about the description, conditions, location and timetable for the implementation of the research training activities, about their rights and obligations under the projects and must assist the researchers in the administrative procedures related to their recruitment.

Best practices presented by beneficiaries

During the policy event, the Region Bretagne presented best practices in administrative support within their COFUND Postdoctoral programme [BIENVENUE](#).

BIENVENUE is coordinated by the Region Bretagne at a Regional Council (local administrative body). There are eight implementing partners: four universities and four research institutions. The Region Bretagne has an annual budget of EUR 30m for supporting and funding research projects. BIENVENUE held three calls with a plan to recruit 25 fellows per call. Instead, they recruited 28 each time, as not infrequently, postdoctoral fellows do not stay for the full two years.

BIENVENUE became a flagship programme for the region, it improved selection procedures, and facilitated relocation to Bretagne. Its approach towards administrative support set a new local go-to standard. At proposal preparation stage, a straightforward strategy for allocating

the resources was agreed on, which led to clear implementation steps. A key component is communication. During application stage, candidates had access to a toolbox that contained all the information and documents. Employed fellows received a handbook and templates of applicable documents. Moreover, project management of BIENVENUE remained up to date with issues of their fellows and did not hesitate to contact a Project Officer.

Upon recruitment, fellows could watch a webinar covering fundamental information on the programme, the Region Bretagne, and on being an MSCA fellow. Initially, programme staff created a handbook, but the introduction of webinars on these topics proved more effective. Explaining the use of research funds, covering travel expenses and publications was a steep learning curve, and it was improved during the second call. Laureates created a WhatsApp group to get to know each other, but most importantly to exchange experiences. When questions arose, fellows would appoint a spokesperson to address the issues collectively, and the answer was later shared with everyone in the group.

At the start of each individual research project, the host institutions are obliged to provide a work contract to allow fellows to receive half of the funding within the first two-three months. In terms of co-funding, the host institutes cover 10% of the salary and the research cost, and Region Bretagne is responsible for the remaining 90%.

The programme established two contact points: one in the host institution and one within the BIENVENUE staff. Both fellows and host institutions were made aware of their rights and obligations. A dedicated BIENVENUE website was set up and is currently used for showcasing fellows, their work and achievements. For those fellows who do not speak French, there are international help centres available to support them with practical issues such as finding accommodation, opening a bank account and finding schools for children.

Feedback from beneficiary consultations

Beneficiaries mentioned **administrative procedures** (63% of respondents) and the **impact of inflation** (51%) as **major challenges for their COFUND projects**.

Feedback from NCP consultations

NCPs indicate that applicants appreciate the fact that Letters of Commitment from implementing and associated partners are no longer needed in the application. Getting these was seen as a huge burden.

The **COFUND consortium set-up can be complex**. COFUND is a mono-beneficiary action. Only one legal entity established in an EU MS/HE AC can apply to the COFUND scheme through the Funding and Tenders Portal (FTP), as a beneficiary. The beneficiary is the sole signatory to the Grant Agreement, and receives the EU funding, claims costs, and takes complete responsibility for the proper implementation of the proposed programme.

The mono-beneficiary setup of COFUND projects is questionable: while the **implementing partners** are only a third parties in the COFUND project, they have a **crucial task and responsibility** for the successful implementation of such projects as they are the ones recruiting the MSCA researchers. However, while having this crucial task, they cannot claim costs of the programme directly from REA but receive financial support through the beneficiary. **Often, they contribute to the total co-funding budget of the consortium.** 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. Often, the associated partners do not provide funding but contribute in-kind.

Data from REA show that of the 305 COFUND projects funded so far under H2020 and HE¹⁶, approximately two-thirds are truly mono-beneficiary, i.e. one beneficiary recruiting all the

¹⁶ Seven calls of H2020, first three calls of HE

researchers. Another **one third of COFUND projects are in fact multi-beneficiary** projects, with one beneficiary coordinating the project (and sometimes also recruiting the researchers), implementing partners recruiting the researchers and implementing a core part of the work, and possibly associated partners. In those 305 H2020 and HE COFUND projects, there is a total of 971 partners that recruit researchers. The number of partners vary in the projects, **between 1 and 54 partners** (in addition to the beneficiary/coordinator). Note that for the 86 projects funded under HE so far, the majority of researchers are not yet recruited and therefore the number of partners recruiting the researchers is not yet available.

Both implementing and associated partners 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. In addition, associated partners (but not implementing partners) must be included under the participants section in the part A of the proposal on the Funding and Tenders Portal. If the implementing and/or associated partners are not known at the time of application, which is the case for many projects, these can be added during the lifetime of the project for both Doctoral and Postdoctoral schemes in agreement with REA. Despite having an important project role, the implementing partners are not visible in the statistics, due to the fact that they are not listed in part A of the proposal.

This feels unjust, as implementing partners often are important institutions in a COFUND project because they contribute to the co-funding budget, they recruit researchers and produce results via the individual research projects. It also leads to the situation that REA cannot produce statistics on the participation of implementing partners (unless done by going through each grant agreement manually), which is a serious shortcoming as this leads to a lack of transparency in which organisations are actually implementing the COFUND projects. This also leads to missed opportunities: organisations from Widening Countries (but not only) often participate in funded COFUND projects as implementing partners. As these are statistically invisible, it makes it impossible for NCPs from Widening (and other) countries to show the participation of research organisations from their country in COFUND projects, in other roles than as beneficiary.

NCPs report that **funded COFUND projects are administratively burdensome**. In many projects, project managers are hired, and they find it very difficult to address all associated tasks in a few months. Note that **project managers are hired without any EU contribution for project management, unlike MSCA DN projects** for example. The beneficiary is responsible for the total budget, for explaining the programme and its rules to the implementing partners, considering a consortium agreement or other agreement between beneficiary and implementing and/or associated partners, whilst keeping in mind national legislation of countries where all partners are located. This set-up is complex. In addition, when the funding to hire the project manager is lacking, this may lead to a disconnect between project partners, lack of consistency for recruited researchers without a central point of contact, and misunderstanding in the implementation of the COFUND rules, etc. NCPs report on projects where such tasks (with exception of the funding task) are left to the implementing partners. Suggestions have been made for further training for the beneficiaries so that they can take up these tasks successfully.

The flexibility of the COFUND programme allows many different, eligible consortium set-ups. **Although this flexibility is appreciated, it can also cause confusion**. It is not always clear what is allowed and what would be the most optimal consortium set-up for a given project. Applicants fear that they set up the COFUND incorrectly. The budget table in the proposal template is especially daunting, and there are sometimes misunderstandings on how the COFUND allowance can/must be used. Institutions fear they use these funds incorrectly with possible financial consequences. The fact that they can be audited and the fear that the COFUND project and budget is set up incorrectly is reported to be a big concern for universities. These fears can be so substantial that a COFUND project is not even considered.

6.5. Interdisciplinarity with focus on industry

MSCA COFUND co-finances new or existing doctoral programmes and postdoctoral fellowship schemes with the aim of spreading the best practices of the MSCA including international, **inter-sectoral** and **interdisciplinary** research training, as well as international and **cross-sectoral mobility** of researchers at all stages of their careers.

On top of compulsory international mobility, applicants are encouraged to include elements of cross-sectoral mobility and interdisciplinarity into their programmes. Collaboration with a wider set of associated 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.¹⁷

Best practices presented by beneficiaries

During the policy event, the BiOrbic Bioeconomy SFI Research Centre at University College Dublin (Ireland) presented best practices on Interdisciplinarity with focus on industry within their COFUND Doctoral Programme [Talent4BBI](#). The project adheres to the principles described in the Charter as well as to the EU Principles for Innovative Doctoral Training.

Having identified a need to deliver industry-ready graduates, Talent4BBI was developed and set up with nine industry partners (leading European bio-based industries), ten academic partners and three training partners all based in different locations across Europe. Co-funding is provided by the industry partners (around 50%) with a tiny fraction of national funding.

The evaluation and selection process consisted of scientific peer review and interview. After peer review, candidates were shortlisted and independent evaluators assessed the applications. The candidates also had the opportunity to meet the industry and academic supervisors during the recruitment process.

Some of the fellows are placed and employed within industry to gain hands on experience, others are employed by and based within universities. However, all fellows will spend time in industry. Talent4BBI is flexible in terms of time spent in either sector. PhD candidates in Talent4BBI have both an industry supervisor and academic supervisor.

The project acknowledges a gap between the expectations of industry, which is fast-paced, and the reality of research that takes time. Even while applying for COFUND, the group of industry partners underwent several changes, but the sought-after projects were finetuned once the COFUND funding was granted.

All the industry partners signed strict IP arrangements within the consortium agreement. In addition, there is a hosting agreement between the industry partner, the academic partner, and beneficiary (three-way agreement) of each individual research project.

Training offered to fellows during training events focuses on four strategic areas: feedstock, processing, market, and products. Transferable skills training focuses on skills that are relevant for careers in academia and industry, for instance, project management, engaging with media, business case feasibility, marketing, dissemination, or open science. Supervisors are also offered dedicated training to facilitate bringing industry and academia together. Training partners are only involved in-kind, but they gain exposure to the consortium, other industry partners, and future bioeconomy leaders.

Working with industry was perceived as challenging with the economic recession and different cost demands that have appeared over the years, including industry stakeholders that have changed over time because people have left the company or were made redundant.

¹⁷ MSCA Work Programme 2023-2025

Feedback from beneficiary consultations

Of the existing beneficiaries, the majority (57%) reported **no obstacles to the participation of private non-profit organisations in their projects**. Topics that were considered obstacles to the participation of private non-profit organisations include concerns about intellectual property rights (23% of respondents) and lack of awareness (15%). Administrative processes and requirements for participation were reported as overly burdensome (12%).

Feedback from NCP consultations

NCPs discussed already existing sustainable collaborations between academic and non-academic organisations, for example within SFI Research Centres (IE). NCPs indicate that such collaborations could form a good basis for setting up an intersectoral COFUND project, with beneficiary and implementing partner roles to be distributed across the collaboration.

However, **non-academic participation in COFUND projects is mostly restricted to them being implementing partners or associated partners**. There are 13 COFUND projects (4% to date (H2020 and the first three calls of HE) coordinated by a private-for-profit organisation and a few more COFUND projects coordinated by another type of non-academic partner.

In line with remarks made by the Talent4BBI representative, NCPs confirm that **it is difficult to motivate the private sector to lead or participate in COFUND projects**. The reasons are various, including the private and academic sector working on different timelines, both sectors having different objectives, and practical issues such as IPR management. In a similar way, it is difficult to motivate other non-academic organisations such as NGOs or policy makers to participate in COFUND projects, leading to their low participation in the programme.

6.6. Dissemination and communication of research results

In their proposals, applicants must demonstrate the transparency of the selection process of the researchers, including the dissemination of the calls in appropriate ways and information provided to candidates. Furthermore, applicants must present plans for dissemination and exploitation activities, including communication activities, public outreach and valorisation, to maximise the impact of the proposed project. This plan, a mandatory deliverable, must be submitted at mid-term and an update towards the end of the project.¹⁸ Moreover, the researchers must ensure the visibility of EU funding in all communications or publications and in applications for the protection of results. The beneficiaries must also disseminate the project results as soon as feasible, in a publicly available format.

Best practices presented by beneficiaries

During the policy event, the Universidad Carlos III de Madrid (UC3M) presented best practices on Dissemination and Communication of Research Results within their COFUND Postdoctoral Programme [CONEX-Plus](#).

CONEX-Plus has a clear management structure with a PC team, a management team, human resources, and research service, supported by university support units such as IT, the library, and institutional communication. Their commitment was planned from proposal start in a realistic, feasible manner, which was seen to be essential. An example was given of involving the current director of the open science lab who will support the CONEX-Plus fellows. The economic management service supports the fellows with monitoring their dissemination and communication budget.

Prior to the application stage, the university IT services created a dedicated platform for submission, evaluation, selection and recruitment, which is currently used as a website for

¹⁸ MSCA Work Programme 2023-2025, and proposal template COFUND call 2024

communicating research results. Furthermore, the programme staff led a dissemination campaign with a corporate visual identity, video, and a focus on attracting talented female researchers.

Each reporting period included dissemination, communication, and social activities. Fellows shared their papers and presentations as well as information on project execution with the scientific community. Communication activities were either held online or in a hybrid format (during the COVID pandemic). Any news or updates were posted on available social media. On a regular basis, researchers take part in so-called CONEX-Plus breakfasts, where fellows present their work with terminology/topics adjusted to the audience. CONEX-Plus representatives stressed that ethical aspects are important during dissemination and communication activities.

CONEX-Plus training activities were compulsory and were divided into blocks, of which dissemination and communication is one. Fellows also received dedicated training on exploitation of research outcomes, and on the topic of excellence in open science and becoming an 'open scientist'. Initially, it was designed for CONEX-Plus researchers, but it has been later offered to all university colleagues. Other examples of training are a communication masterclass, and guidance on planning research project communication.

6.7. Additional topics raised during NCP consultations and on 20 June 2024

NCPs praise the high level of flexibility with regards to the set-up of COFUND. In addition, the **bottom-up approach is much appreciated**. However, they also stressed that the **high level of freedom and flexibility leads to misunderstandings, uncertainties and doubts for NCPs and applicants**.

Many NCPs appreciate the fact that the COFUND programme shows **good continuity and reliability of the calls**. This allows the NCPs to design and plan their support to applicants, and it allows potential applicants to plan their COFUND applications. In this respect, the COFUND action is seen as a valuable mechanism to respond to changes in the research landscape.

A number of NCPs underline that the **participation of the Widening Countries in the COFUND action is very low** and that their participation would benefit not only the researchers, but also the participating organisations and the Widening Countries themselves. Indeed, **between 2007–2023, only 6% of COFUND projects** (31 out of 484 funded projects) were coordinated by a beneficiary from a Widening Country. Within this group, two Widening Countries were moderately successful as COFUND coordinators: Czechia (6 projects) and Poland (9 projects). Participation as a beneficiary or implementing partner in a COFUND project would allow the Widening Countries to align their existing practices with MSCA policies, and to benefit from a structuring effect of the COFUND action on the institutional and national levels. However, as stressed during the consultation with NCPs, safeguarding the sufficient co-funding resources from national or regional institutions in Widening countries is very difficult and this might be the main obstacle in participation of these countries in COFUND.

Throughout the day, and relating to many topics, NCPs regularly commented that they do not have (a lot of) experience with COFUND proposals themselves mainly because the **number of submitted and successful proposals from most of the MS/AC is too low**. As a consequence, they find it difficult to promote the programme, to discuss possible set-up with potential applicants, answer their questions, review the proposals etc. Notwithstanding that MSCA NCPs receive regular training from REA and through the MSCA-Net project.

7. Chapter 3 – Practical recommendations

The flexibility in the COFUND programme is considered both positively and negatively. It gives freedom to set up projects adapted to the possibilities and needs of the applicants or consortium, but it also raises many questions. Throughout the consultation meetings and the COFUND policy event, NCPs outlined various topics on which more information is needed, and the way(s) such information could be provided to NCPs and to applicants/beneficiaries. Note though that many of these practical recommendations would lead to longer or to more numerous documents, which is something the NCPs and applicants do not desire either. A careful balance should be found between providing information that is clearly missing at this point and keeping the EU documentation at reasonable length.

Although well-trained NCPs can make a positive contribution to participation of applicants from their country in the COFUND action, more training and more documents will not automatically lead to more applicants/beneficiaries from all countries. Often, the barriers for organisations to participate in the COFUND programme are of a legal, administrative, strategic, or policy nature, and this will not change by providing more training or documents.

7.1. Practical ways to provide a better support to NCPs

The **NCP project RADIANCE (previously MSCA-Net)** should play an important role, given the project's main objective is to facilitate the transnational cooperation between NCPs for the MSCA to achieve a consistent and harmonized level of NCP support¹⁹. The project will collaborate with REA where relevant. Concrete suggestions mentioned during the NCP consultation meetings include:

- Providing list with minimum requirements for the set-up of the evaluation, selection and recruitment process that must be described in COFUND proposals. This would indicate the basics that are expected and support applicants in finding the right level of detail.
- Providing further clarification and examples of the use of the COFUND Seal of Excellence.
- Providing further clarification and examples of the use of Cohesion Funds for co-funding.
- Making available a `blind` successful proposal, eventually with some details blanked out.
- Collating success stories on different topics (e.g. the use of the Seal of Excellence mechanism and the use of Cohesion funding, including an explanation on the topic of State aid).
- There is ample useful information on CIRCABC where NCPs have access. NCPs should explore ways how to better use this information, e.g. via the NCP project.
- Providing additional training and information for NCPs in the key topics identified by NCPs, through initiatives such as: mentoring of lesser-experienced NCPs, organization of a "Train the Trainers" event within a specific country or for a group of NCPs, etc.

Throughout the COFUND policy event, but specifically in discussions related to financial issues, NCPs reported that beneficiaries fear they will set up the COFUND project incorrectly, with possible consequences when being audited. These fears can be so substantial that a COFUND project is not even considered.

¹⁹ [Home Page - MSCA-NET](#)

NCPs indicate that beneficiaries are asking for further and more COFUND-specific training, on the expected (or not) matching rate and the source(s) of co-funding provided by the beneficiaries/consortia.

7.2. Practical ways to provide a better support to applicants and beneficiaries

- REA should continue to organise the Beneficiary days, ensuring they are focused on the specifics of COFUND projects.
- Call documentation could further clarify topics that beneficiaries find confusing or challenging, such as expected co-funding rates or the possible set-up of the projects.
- An audit guide could be prepared (by group of NCPs in cooperation with REA), possibly within the context of the NCP project. Focusing specifically on the COFUND action, information should be provided on the preparation of the budget, the possible use of different budget categories, and audit procedures.
- The NCP project could collect FAQ on financial issues and include it on their website.
- The production of post-award documentation on European level is complex as implementation of the projects is different across countries. However, the production of such guides (per country or grouped) could be taken up in the frame of the NCP project.
- The MCAA Research Managers Group (RMWG) is a network of European Project Managers including many with expertise on applying for and managing COFUND projects. In some countries, national research managers groups exist. Such groups could be brought to the attention of all NCPs and beneficiaries.

8. Chapter 4 – Policy recommendations

In terms of MSCA-COFUND policy, **seven policy recommendations** are listed below. They are linked to the six expected impact areas and include a few practical points to be considered.

a) Structuring effect

An important expected impact is its **structuring effect on the research landscapes of the participating beneficiaries**. One of the core objectives of the COFUND programme is to promote best MSCA practices in the recruitment and employment process of the researcher at the institutional level.

A small number of countries are successful in the COFUND action and in these countries the structuring effect might be reached. But the structuring impact should take place across Europe. The **main constraint for many potential applicants, as mentioned above, is the lack of regional, national or institutional funding schemes** they have access to, or **too many constraints for using such money for a COFUND project**.

In addition, often the same institutions from the same countries get access to the alternative funding. As a consequence, they apply and are successful in successive COFUND calls. This negatively affects the chances of new and/or less experienced applicants to get EU funding and thus makes it impossible to spread good practice beyond the repeat customers.

A precondition for reaching the objective of supporting the structuring of national research landscapes is that research organisations and countries from across Europe participate in the COFUND action. **Data show that this is not the case** (see 2.3 and 2.7), and consequently it can be concluded that the COFUND action **does not achieve its expected impact of having a structuring effect on the research landscapes of the participating beneficiaries**.

Recommendation 1: REA/Commission is invited to consider the abolishment of the co-funding principle altogether and implement a 100% funding mechanism. This could contribute to wider participation across Europe in the COFUND-successor action.

In addition to the recommendation above, more insight is needed on the following aspects:

- Why some countries are more successful in COFUND than other countries. It seems that the uneven participation in the COFUND action mean that the COFUND action is biased towards countries having a specific research landscape or a specific research funding system.
- Why regional and national authorities, and top-level management from universities and research organisations do not wish to engage in the COFUND action. Where relevant, REA/Commission should directly engage with these groups, as these are often not the target groups of the NCPs.
- Would the introduction of a Widening initiative for COFUND, suggested by a number of NCPs, really bring an expected effect? If considered relevant, the feasibility of such an initiative along the lines of ERA Fellowships modalities in the MSCA Postdoctoral Fellowships action could be investigated.

b) Training and skills

The expected impact for supported doctoral candidates or postdoctoral researchers refers to them **acquiring deeper and more diverse skills and competences**, leading to *improved employability and career prospects in both the academic and non-academic sectors*.

Based on feedback from the beneficiary consultations and examples like the one presented by IRB Barcelona, it can be concluded that the COFUND action **does meet its expected impact on training doctoral candidates and postdoctoral researchers**.

Recommendation 2: The COFUND-successor action should **keep its focus on provision of training of researchers**, as this provides them with deeper and more diverse skills and competences, leading to improved employability and career prospects in both the academic and non-academic sectors.

c) Focus on Excellence

One of the main principles applying to the MSCA is the principle of **Excellence**: excellence of supported fellows, but also excellence of the R&I methodologies applied, the research conducted as well as the training, supervision and career guidance provided.

However, COFUND projects focus more on processes (evaluation and selection process, promotion of the programme, dissemination) than on the excellence of the research itself. Compared to MSCA DN, PF and SE actions, a small part of the proposal is devoted to a description of the excellence of the research programme and the quality of the research options.

With regard to the recruited researchers in COFUND projects, does COFUND always recruit excellent researchers? This is an issue that is difficult to address as REA will monitor efforts made to attract researchers but has no influence on the number of researchers actually applying to a given call for proposals.

Recommendation 3: The COFUND-successor action should **clearly focus on research excellence**, similarly to the MSCA-DN and MSCA-PF.

If feasible, REA/Commission is also invited to update the Work Programme and proposal templates for subsequent calls in HE, asking for more explicit information on the **excellence of the research programme proposed**.

d) Salary of researchers

The EU funding for salaries provided to COFUND fellows typically differ from the salaries from Marie Skłodowska-Curie fellows recruited in MSCA-DN and MSCA-PF projects. This creates two groups of MSCA fellows: those funded by MSCA-DN and MSCA-PF with rates set by the EC, and those funded by MSCA-COFUND with a lower, minimum salary level set by the EC.

In addition, the COFUND action does not foresee in the application of the country correction coefficient to ensure equal treatment and purchasing power parity for all researchers.

Recommendation 4: Researchers recruited in COFUND-successor action should receive the same monthly salary as researchers recruited in MSCA-DN and MSCA-PF projects. The budget table in the COFUND proposal template should be adjusted.

Recommendation 5: REA/Commission is invited to **introduce the Country Correction Coefficient** in the COFUND-successor action, similarly to MSCA DN and MSCA PF.

e) Participation of non-academic sector

COFUND aims to enhance talent and knowledge circulation through **international, inter-sectoral and interdisciplinary mobility**, and establish *sustainable collaboration between academic and non-academic organisations*.

For this to happen, substantial participation of the non-academic sector in the COFUND action is needed. Stronger non-academic participation in COFUND projects in terms of recruitment, training needs identification, training opportunities and involvement in project management could strengthen the interdisciplinary and intersectoral training offer in COFUND projects.

Recommendation 6: REA/Commission is invited to **analyse why non-academic participation in COFUND projects is low**, and to address this matter in the COFUND-successor action.

f) COFUND project set-up

The COFUND project set-up is perceived as complex. This may lead to non-participation in the COFUND action, which consequently hampers the potential structuring effect on the research landscapes on institutions and countries across Europe. Where formally all COFUND projects are mono-beneficiary, in reality one third of H2020 and HE funded projects are multi-beneficiary.

The formal introduction of multi-beneficiary COFUND projects, possibly along the lines of MSCA-DN, would do justice to the important role of implementing partners in the projects, it would solve problems related to the cascading funding mechanism and it would lead to all partners being statistically visible.

Recommendation 7: REA/Commission is invited to consider the **formal introduction of a multi-beneficiary set-up** in the COFUND-successor action.

