



MSCA

CONFERENCE

Report

and

Recommendations





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1. INTRODUCTION

The Spanish Presidency of the Council of the European Union took place on the second semester of 2023. As part of the presidency events, the Spanish Foundation for Science and Technology (FECYT) organized on behalf the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation a conference of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA).

The conference with the title *MSCA: Diverse Research Careers to tackle Global Challenges* took place in Toledo (Spain) on the 14th and 15th of November with the overarching objective of fostering the connection between science and policy making to better address societal challenges and raising the visibility of MSCA as an instrument which can contribute to strengthening the link with the policy agenda.

More specifically, the objectives of the conference were the following:

- To foster the discussion of the relevance of science for policy in contributing to tackling global challenges and how MSCA as a bottom-up approach programme can support both researchers and policy makers in this rising field.
- To learn more about the state of play of the main actions carried out in the ERA Policy Agenda in relation with the promotion of attractive and sustainable research careers, balanced talent circulation and international, transdisciplinary and inter sectoral mobility across the European Research Area.
- To enable open and interactive sessions on some of the MSCA main features with the objective to come up with suggestions or preliminary ideas that could be implemented in the 2025-2027 MSCA Work Programme.
- To allow the gathering and networking of the main European and international actors involved in human resources, mobility and research career development in order to foster collaborations, synergies among the participating actors.

With these objectives in mind, the conference addressed ongoing initiatives in the realm of science for policy, the contributions of MSCA to societal challenges from a global perspective to a local impact, and the future of diverse and inclusive research careers, including professional paths to support evidence-based policy making.

The conference had the aim of gathering up to 150 MSCA stakeholders physically in the meeting and reaching up to 1.000 remote attendees. The final numbers of participation where 176 on-site participants covering 38 countries, and more than 2.500 views along the two days if the conference (Fig 1).



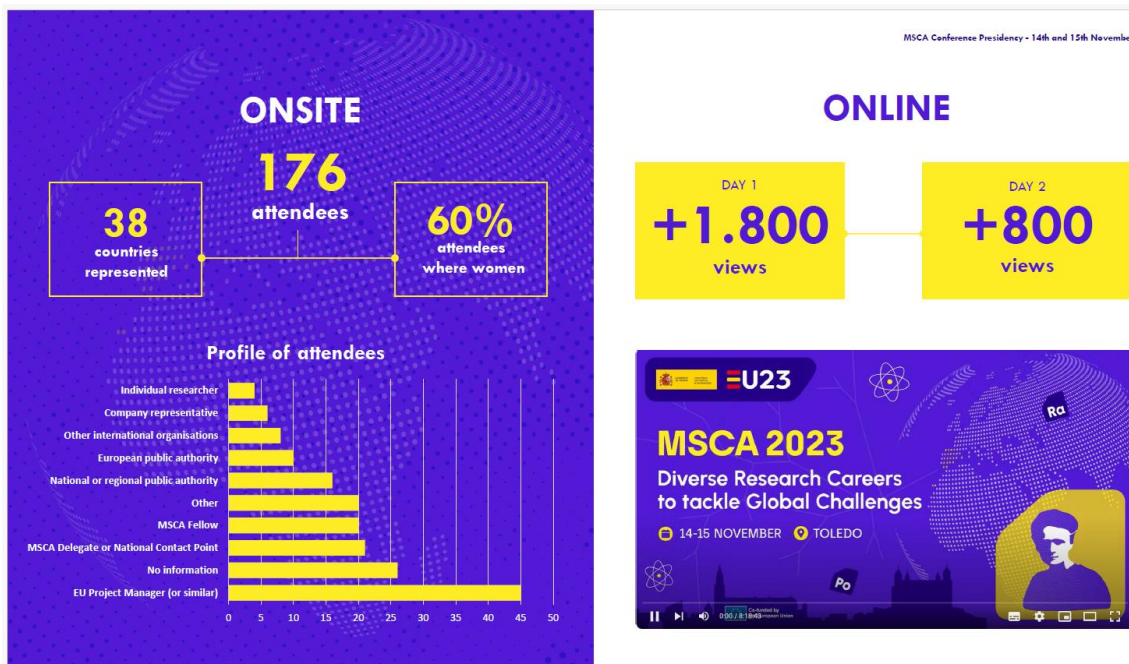


Figure 1. Summary of conference audience.

This report summarizes the outputs of the conference, including recommendations to the MSCA programme stemming from the interactive sessions of the conference (parallel workshops) to foster stronger contributions from MSCA for connecting science and policymaking.

2. CONTENT OF CONFERENCE

Main blocks and contributors

14 de Novembre

Opening keynote speech: *The relevance of putting science to the service of policy making to contribute to advancing global challenges*

This first presentation aimed at inspiring conference discussions by informing what we understand as science for public policies to highlight the need to promote this connection between research outcomes and their impact and use by policy-making bodies, but also the existing challenges.

Keynote speaker: Lorenzo Melchor, Policy Analyst, Joint Research Centre, European Commission

Policy panel 1: *How is science contributing to shape EU policy in its mission to confront global challenges?*

This panel addressed the main features of the MSCA programme that can foster a greater connection between science and public policy to tackle global challenges. This information was



complemented by the perspective of current initiatives providing already scientific evidence, such as the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change or the Spanish Congress's Science and Technology Office (Oficina C). Through this exchange, the aim was to further identify barriers and gaps that need to be addressed to build more efficient science-for-public policy ecosystems, as well as to specify possible contributions from the MSCA programme.

Moderator: Conor O'Carroll, SciPol Services Ltd, Ireland

Panelists:

- *Izaskun Lacunza, Spanish Foundation for Science and Technology FECYT, Spain*
- *Maria José Sanz, Basque Centre for Climate Change BC3, Spain*
- *Claire Morel, DG EAC MSCA Unit, European Commission*



Figure 2. Policy panel 1 *How is science contributing to shape EU policy in its mission to confront global challenges?*

Parallel workshops: The parallel workshops focused on different key aspects of the MSCA programme relevant to its contribution to public policy design, with the aim of gathering recommendations that could be considered for MSCA to strengthen its role as a link between science and European policies, particularly those aimed at addressing global challenges.

Workshop 1: *The intersectoral dimension of MSCA*

MSCA is a programme in which collaboration between the academic and non-academic sectors during research projects is fundamental. This session was aimed at analysing the intersectorality of the programme from both the perspective of existing mechanisms and the historical perspective (who participates and how). Finally, experiences of researchers collaborating with public administrations (both within and outside the scope of MSCA) will be presented, all with



the aim of promoting greater participation of this type of entity linked to public policy decision-making within this European funding programme.

Moderator: Murat Gunes, Marie Curie Alumni Association MCAA

Panelists:

- *Anouk Lafortune, DG EAC MSCA Unit, European Commission*
- *Jesús Rojo, Fundación para el Conocimiento Madri+d, Spain*
- *Eduardo Oliver, Center for Biological Research CIB - CSIC, Spain*
- *Anna Berti, University of Florence, Italy*

Workshop 2: MSCA from global to regional

A fundamental element of MSCA is its open nature regarding research topics, with excellent science being the foundation of the programme. However, alignment with European policy priorities and impact not only scientifically and economically, but also socially, is encouraged. Based on this premise, this session addressed both the programme's capacity to foster international networks of scientists working in key areas that would allow for the joint tackling of global challenges, and the contribution of MSCA through the execution of specific projects that produce more localized impacts.

Moderator: Mostafa Moonir, Marie Curie Alumni Association MCAA

Panelists:

- *Gerard Bros Pérez, DG EAC MSCA Unit, European Commission*
- *Estrella Díaz, University of Castilla la Mancha UCLM, Spain*
- *Joaquín Silvestre-Albero, University of Alicante, Spain*
- *Fernanda Bajanca, Marie Curie Alumni Association MCAA*

Workshop 3: MSCA and inclusiveness

MSCA is a programme that promotes diversity and inclusivity at various levels, an element considered key for the development of public policies for all people. This session specifically addressed the efforts within the programme not only to encourage the participation of researchers from all countries but also to contribute to real inclusion that fosters the creation of a global community. Based on best practices in creating multicultural environments within institutions through MSCA projects, the session also focused on the programme's recent efforts to support researchers subject to forced mobility, such as war refugees. Finally, the connection between these MSCA projects and their outcomes with the design of policies supporting inclusivity were explored.

Moderator: Donata Iandolo, Marie Curie Alumni Association MCAA

Panelists:

- *Erle Rikmann, Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Estonia*
- *Joaquin Capablo, Campus Iberus, Spain*
- *Marija Mitic, DG EAC MSCA Unit, European Commission*
- *Iryna Mazhak, RCSI University of Medicine and Health Sciences, Ireland*





Figure 5. Parallel workshop 3 *MSCA and inclusiveness*

15 de Novembre

Policy panel 2: *ERA Action 4 and its connections to MSCA*

This panel addressed the most recent European policy guidelines aimed at making research careers more attractive, diverse, and sustainable within the European Research Area (ERA). These proposals were compared with specific actions and initiatives recently implemented in Spain to improve research careers, and the connection with the principles of MSCA and the programme's impact on scientific career development were explored. Through this discussion, the aim was to identify fundamental measures established by the public administration to support researchers in their efforts to contribute to the development of public policies through their science.

Moderator: Cecilia Cabello, DG R&I, Unit A1 – European Semester & Country Intelligence, European Commission

Panelists:

- *Stijn Delauré, DG R&I, Unit ERA, Spreading Excellence and Research Careers, European Commission*
- *Gonzalo Arévalo, Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation, Spain*
- *Renaud Jolivet, Marie Curie Alumni Association MCAA*



MSCA Awards: Science-Policy Pitch Competition

During the conference, a competition took place where current or past MSCA beneficiaries presented their projects in 3-minute pitches where they highlighted the connection between science and policy.

The competition was organized by the European Commission in collaboration with FECYT and featured 15 finalists on-site in Toledo, which were selected from over 170 applications, divided into three categories (five finalists per category):

1. Contributions to European Union policy priorities: This category includes examples of MSCA projects aligned with European priorities such as Horizon Europe's Missions or the European Green Deal.
2. Exposure to policy development: This category includes examples of MSCA projects with parts of the research project implemented in organizations related to public policy development.
3. Support for policy development based on scientific evidence: This category includes examples of MSCA projects with specific actions for communicating and disseminating research project results to politicians and public administrations.

The conference included 3 sessions, one for each category in which each of the 5 finalists had the opportunity to pitch their project to an international jury (Table 1) and respond to their questions.

NAME AND SURNAME	INSTITUTION
Ms. Antoaneta Angelova-Krasteva	Director for Innovation, Digital Education and International Cooperation, European Commission
Ms. Antonio Mas López	Vice rector of Scientific Policy, University of Castilla la Mancha
Ms. Fernanda Bajanca	Chair, Marie Curie Alumni Association
Ms. Izaskun Lacunza	Director for Science for Policy, Spanish Foundation for Science and Technology
Mr. Pablo Camacho	Head of Unit, Scientific and innovation culture, Spanish Foundation for Science and Technology
Mr. Thomas Hutschalik	Winner of the 2022 Falling Walls Lab edition, Ncardia Services and Maastricht University
Mr. Graham Wilkie	Head of Unit, MSCA and Citizens, COFUND and Support Activities, Research Executive Agency

Table 1. International jury member of the MSCA Awards: Science-Policy Pitch Competition

The jury members evaluated each candidate in three different criteria:



1. **Content of the pitch:** Accessibility of the scientific information provided (to the point, using examples, analogies, etc.) and clear connections of the project to wider EU policy priorities.
2. **Clarity:** Structure of the pitch, clear language and capacity to answer the questions of the jury concisely.
3. **Charisma:** Body language, capacity to engage audience and passion.

Each category had a winner appointed by the jury, plus a fourth audience winner chosen by popular vote using Mentimeter (including on-site and on-line audience). Figure 6 summarizes the results of the competition.

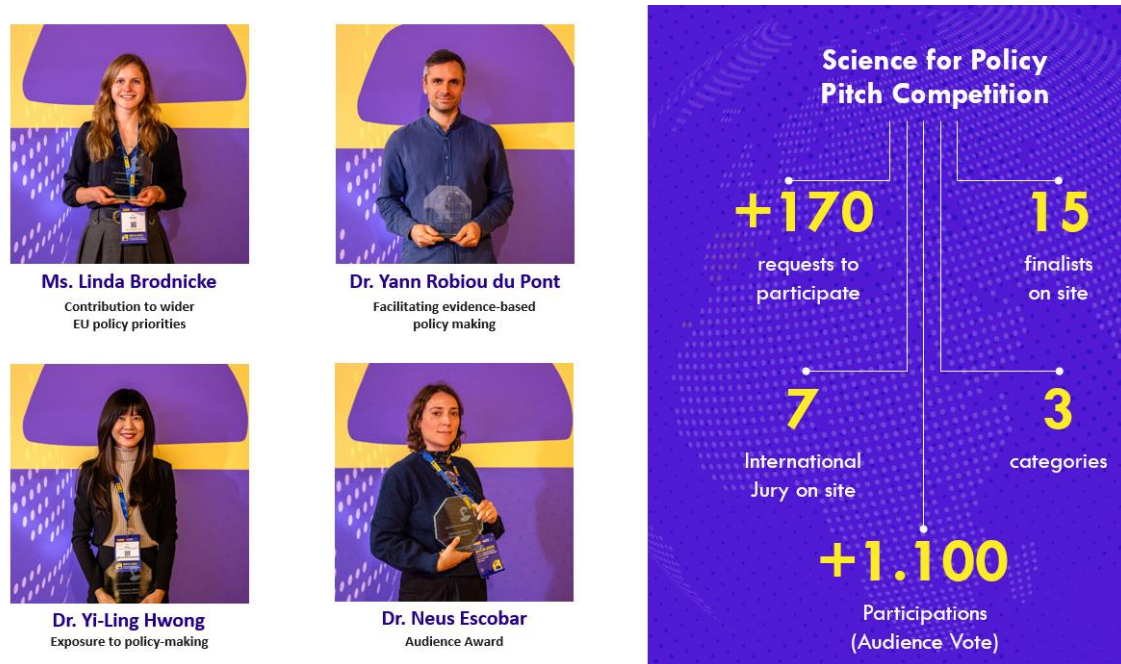


Figure 2. Summary of the results of the MSCA Awards: Science-Policy Pitch Competition

3. CONTENT FROM THE INTERACTIVE PARALLEL SESSIONS

Workshop 1: The intersectoral dimension of MSCA

Non-academic organizations other than public administration participate relatively well in MSCA. This workshop looked at what can be done to facilitate more public administration participation so MSCA can contribute to strengthening science for policy ecosystems.

Anouk Lafortune, policy officer in the MSCA unit in the European Commission, set the scene with some data on public administration participation in MSCA: Public administration represent only 1% of MSCA participation, while we know that 4%-5% of MSCA Fellows end up working in public administration. Despite the current low participation, there are ample opportunities for public administrations to participate in the programme. They can participate on the same basis as any other non-academic organisations, including recruiting fellows, hosting secondments, or participating as placement hosts for postdoctoral fellows.



Jesus Rojo, Head of Unit of European programmes in the Fundación para el Conocimiento Madri+d, presented an analysis of non-academic participation in MSCA. The MSCA-NET project tried to categorize the sector, but it is difficult to reach a comprehensive definition of public administration – behind this term is a universe of different entities.

Eduardo Oliver from CIB-CSIC presented the case study of the “Ciencia en el Parlamento” initiative – “from Twitter to the Parliament in less than a year” via regular meetings, shadowing programmes, and independent scientific advice. It is now followed by the “Science meets regions” initiative of the JRC, to help break down barriers between the worlds of policy and research. The main learning point has been that we need specific people to work on the interface and facilitate the connection.

Anna Berti Suman introduce the audience to civic environmental monitoring, the topic of her MSCA postdoctoral project in the JRC. During her PhD she spent some time in JRC in the capacity of visiting scientist, and this period helped to open doors and get to know one another. The objective of the MSCA project was to innovate how environmental information is used for law enforcement. The network she created during the project remained and expands beyond the project duration. A secondment to a law firm led to employment opportunity after the project.

The introductory presentations were followed by a discussion, facilitated by Murat Günes, MCAA. Participants highlighted the benefits of public administration participation in MSCA: Public administration can offer policy expertise, provide regulatory guidelines, data, resources, facilities, data protection expertise, and long-term sustainability of the research topic, among other aspects. For a researcher, it can be a way to have impact for their research. Public administrations benefit from new ideas and approaches, specialist knowledge, but also networking and increase of visibility and reputation. These reasons are precisely why MSCA has put intersectoral mobility at the centre of the actions, as a means to have excellent, impactful research. MSCA has the potential to be a bridge to connect public administrations and researchers, a tool to learn one another’s language. What remains to be done is to promote these opportunities, create awareness and showcase the success stories.



Figure 3. Parallel workshop 1 *The intersectoral dimension of MSCA*

Workshop 2- MSCA From Global to Regional

The main questions of parallel workshop 2 were:

- How is MSCA currently contributing to addressing Global Challenges?
- What more can be done to strengthen the policy impacts of MSCA in this direction, while safeguarding the bottom-up spirit of the programme?

The WS started with a presentation by Gerard Bros, Policy Officer, DG EAC, who showed that MSCA is already making a strong contribution to solving societal challenges, for example with, so far, 109 projects in the area of the Cancer Mission and 52 projects in the area of the Climate Mission. MSCA also has a very strong international dimension: 50% of all third country organisation participations in Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe was in MSCA projects and 40% of researchers involved in MSCA are non-EU nationals. However, a more strategic approach is needed to reconcile the bottom-up nature of the MSCA with the thematic and policy priorities and with the new Global Approach on cooperation in R&I.

Two very interesting examples of projects that have an impact on both a local and global level were presented:

- Estrella Díaz, Associate Professor of Marketing at the University of Castilla-La Mancha (UCLM), won an H2020 MSCA Global Fellowship called SMARTOURISM, where she studied the consequences of tourists' experiences with smart tourism and also analysed the impact of smart technology infusion and organisational mindfulness by tourism-related SMEs. The project addressed two cross-cutting priorities of H2020 ("New forms of innovation in SMEs" and "Digital empowerment of users") as well as several Sustainable Development Goals (e.g. "Clean Water and Sanitation" and "Sustainable Cities and Communities"). Later, the SMARTOURISM project led to support and coaching activities, for example for destinations in Castilla-La Mancha, for the Spanish Forum for Tourism Conferences and also to participation in the development of public policies.

Another example of how MSCA can have an impact at both regional and global levels is the H2020 MSCA RISE project NanoMed, coordinated by Joaquin Silvestre-Albero, full professor at the Inorganic Chemistry Department, University of Alicante. In NanoMed, the aim of the multidisciplinary consortium was to develop a nanomaterial-based tablet that removes radionuclides, toxins and reactive oxygen species in body fluids and can be used to treat serious health conditions related to exposure to external radiation. The project also contributes to policy goals, such as the SDGs "Good Health and Well-being" and "Life on Land".

Finally, Fernanda Bajanca from the MCAA gave an overview of the association and showed some interesting statistics that illustrated the wide spread of its members in terms of age, nationality, and country of residence. The MCAA Chapters cover most parts of the world and the various working groups contribute to policy in several areas, such as gender equality, science communication, bridging science and business and, of course, the career development of researchers.

The ensuing discussion, chaired by Mostafa Moonir, MCAA, focused on what more can be done to strengthen the policy impact of MSCA. It was stated that there is a clear gap between researchers and policy makers and that researchers need to find a way to better transfer their results to policy makers and to do this in an understandable way. Therefore, training in these



kind of skills is important. To identify the policy makers relevant to their respective research field, researchers need support, e.g. from universities, but the exchange between researchers and policy makers also requires continuous support from the European Commission. Workshop participants emphasized that we should have a more collaborative model and work more in teams, as many actors are not pure researchers but have different skills and roles. Thus, we should not just talk about support, but about collaboration.

There was also a discussion about what the most important topics for MSCA will be in the future, and there was a broad consensus that it is essential that MSCA remains a bottom-up programme. This approach offers researchers greater freedom to identify regional problems and find solutions to them, which can then be transferred to a regional/global level. It was expressed that MSCA is an ideal programme in some aspects and that things that work well should not be changed. However, it will be important to increase efforts to bring together people and projects working on the same topics and make them more visible.

Towards the end of the discussion, an example from the USA was brought up, where university professors spend a year in public administration and then return to academia.



Figure 4. Parallel workshop *MSCA from global to regional*

Workshop 3: MSCA and inclusiveness

The starting point for this workshop was the acknowledgement that the MSCA is a programme fostering diversity and inclusiveness in science, but it tried to address the question on whether there were actions that could be done to ensure that this diversity contributes to better policies for all?

The session chair, Donata landolo, who is working as a researcher at Inserm and an MCAA board member, set the scene of the workshop by talking about the various forms of inclusiveness. She emphasized that different ideas and concepts of inclusiveness exist and that



this area is extremely complex. Above all, inclusiveness should be seen as diversity, which holds great potential.

Erle Rikmann, scientific advisor at the Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and a former MSCA Individual Fellow (2015-2017), emphasized the importance of inclusiveness, particularly regarding intersectoral mobility, and pointed out that inclusiveness stands for knowledge exchange. The political and public sector in particular needed this knowledge from researchers in order to make high-quality decisions.

Joaquin Capablo, who currently coordinates an MSCA COFUND programme for postdoctoral researchers (Iberus Experience) and who is a former MSCA-Fellow himself as well, presented the COFUND programme, in which eleven researchers from nine different countries on four different continents conducted research. There was a great deal of diversity and, accordingly, many challenges. It was not only necessary to integrate the researchers administratively, but also into the daily life of their cities outside of work. To this end, mentors and ambassadors are active in the project to enable full integration.

Marija Mitic, policy analyst in the MSCA unit in the European Commission, referred to the importance of safeguarding and attracting talent. We must not lose talent due to a lack of inclusiveness. She also highlighted that it is important to understand that inclusiveness and excellence are not mutually exclusive, but rather complementary. The European Union and the MSCA in particular are very active here through various grants and other support measures, especially for researchers at risk.

Iryna Mazhak, who is currently an MSCA4Ukraine Fellow at RCSI University of Medicine and Health Sciences (Dublin), reported on the particular challenges faced by researchers at risk compared to researchers who are regularly mobile internationally. Unlike usually, there is no preparation time for the stay abroad, as you are forced to leave your home country quickly. It is precisely this haste that causes great difficulties for researchers, but also for host institutions. In addition, researchers at risk experience other problems such as depression, anxiety and stress. The standards applied to voluntarily mobile researchers would not apply here.

The opening statements were followed by a lively discussion involving the audience. It became clear that the MSCA were already doing a great deal to support inclusiveness. In order to raise this to a political level, science for policy actions would also be carried out in the MSCA over the next few years. These could be used to highlight the importance and diversity of the topic even more prominently. However, implementation must take place at national, regional or institutional level, where there is often still a lack of clarity or uncertainty as to how inclusiveness can be achieved profitably. This is not least due to the fact that this term is understood in so many different ways, as the workshop also showed. This is precisely why all stakeholders must remain in dialog and expand it.





Figure 5. Parallel workshop 3 *MSCA and inclusiveness*

6. CONCLUSIONS FROM THE CONFERENCE

Identified challenges to boost science for policy:

- Effective science for policy requires the development of favorable ecosystems with interconnected stakeholders.
- Within these ecosystems researchers need to have the knowledge or the resources to help them navigate the policy-making process, and thus, to identify the existing opportunities and alternatives to inform policy. These can range from preparing specific outputs for policymakers (e.g., policy briefs) to transitioning into knowledge broker roles.
- Public administrations in general can also have a learning curve in regard to integrating scientific expertise into their internal capacity.
- Knowledge brokers are expected to be essential figures to build this ecosystem and in supporting researchers and public administrations to collaborate better.
- This position of knowledge broker should be formally acknowledged and be part of the diverse career pathways that researchers could have to increase the attractiveness of scientific careers.
- To incentivize researchers to engage at different levels with policy making, science for policy efforts need to be properly acknowledged and rewarded within the research career.
- The design of meeting points for the different stakeholders of a science for policy ecosystem are essential.



Main conclusions from the parallel workshops in regard to MSCA:

- MSCA offers opportunities to allow researchers to be exposed to policy making environments with its current features (eligibility of public administration as beneficiary, secondments and non-academic placements).
- MSCA bottom-up nature should not be seen as a potential limitation to impact in policies addressing Global Challenges, but as an asset. It offers researchers greater freedom to identify relevant problems and find solutions to them, which can then be transferred to a regional/global level.
- Participation of Public administration in MSCA so far is higher in the current framework programme Horizon Europe than in the previous Horizon 2020. Nevertheless, their overall participation in the programme is still limited.
- Public administration within MSCA is still a very diffuse term bringing together different organizations, with very different roles and capacities in policymaking.
- All three i's of the MSCA programme are considered assets to strengthen the potential impact of scientific activities in policy.

Recommendations

To the European Commission

- Showcase existing good practices contributing to the establishment of science for policy ecosystems. This would help institutions (including public administration) and researchers to better identify existing opportunities, such as the MSCA programme.
- Continue striving for a recognition of science for policy activities as part of the researcher career. The fact that evidence-informed policy-making is mentioned in regards to the assessment of researchers in the new European Charter for Researchers is a positive example.
- Support the inclusion of knowledge brokers as part of the diverse career paths for researchers and research managers.
- Considering the current characteristics of the MSCA programme, no additional red tape (i.e., requirements) should be put into the preparation of the proposals in order to foster more science for policy activities, although measures to raise awareness about the opportunities offered by the programme would still be needed (e.g., guidelines, showcasing good practices, stronger promotion of public administration as non-academic participants, etc.)
- Foster meeting points and engagement platforms for the different stakeholders to meet. This includes meeting points between different scientific disciplines to better inform policy.

To institutions

- Raise awareness among the research community about the need to impact policy.
- Advance towards integrating policy impact units and knowledge brokers as part of their structure.
- Recognize the efforts of researchers to contribute to evidence-informed policy-making.



- Build upon diversity of the research community to contribute towards policy outputs.
- Offer capacity building opportunities to researchers and research managers to better understand the policy process, as well as training opportunities for policymakers on scientific literacy.

To researchers

- Engage in capacity building opportunities for a more complete understanding of the policy process.
- Further use of existing programmes and initiatives (e.g., MSCA Industrial Doctoral Networks or placements in MSCA Postdoctoral Fellowships) to engage with public administration.
- Engage in the production of scientific outputs directly aimed at policy impact (e.g., systematic reviews or policy briefs).
- Advocate within the institutions to the need of policy impact units, knowledge brokers or similar structures with the aim of informing policy.

