

MSCA Doctoral Networks – Frequently Asked Questions at the Proposal Stage

Please note that this FAQ document has been developed specifically with reference to Imperial applicants. It may differ from other institutional practices. If you have questions about the Doctoral Networks scheme which are not addressed here, please contact the [EU Team](#).

It also attaches Guidance Notes from UKRO, the UK National Contact Point for the MSCA.

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Q: Are there any success figures that I can include in the application to show Imperial’s quality as a host organisation?

A: Any description of Imperial as a host organisation should **focus primarily on the relevant department** as the quality of the immediate environment in which the researcher will be trained is most relevant for evaluation. However, you may want to include some high-level information on Imperial to show overall quality and capacity to host; figures on previous successes in FP7, Horizon 2020, and Horizon Europe are as follows:

- **Framework Programme 7 (2007-2013)** Imperial participated in over 670 FP7 projects, including 58 Marie Skłodowska-Curie ITNs, IAPPs and IRSES projects. Among higher education institutions, Imperial had the third largest number of signed FP7 grant agreements (2007-2013, 7th FP7 monitoring report).
- **Horizon 2020 (2014-2020)** Imperial was fully committed to involvement in Horizon 2020 which began in January 2014. Imperial was awarded over 430 Horizon 2020 projects to date, of which 54 were Marie Skłodowska-Curie Innovative Training Networks.
- **Horizon Europe (2021-)** Imperial participates in over 201 projects resulting from successful Horizon proposals across all areas of Horizon Europe. Of these, Imperial participates in: 25 Marie Skłodowska-Curie Doctoral Network projects as an Associated Partner receiving funding from UKRI for its Doctoral Candidate recruitments; and in 62 UKRI funded

Postdoctoral Fellowships which were successful in Horizon Europe Marie Skłodowska-Curie Postdoctoral Fellowships calls in 2021 through 2023.

Q: Does the MSCA DN grant cover the recruited Doctoral Candidate's tuition fees?

A: Not directly. There is no specific allocation with the MSCA DN grant funding for tuition fees. It is a mandatory condition of the grant that the Host Institution must not charge tuition fees to the recruited Doctoral Candidate. **The recruiting Department will therefore be liable for the fee.** This tuition cost should therefore be considered in any Worktribe record prepared prior to proposal submission.

The Department may choose to pay the applicable tuition fee upfront from outside of the project. Alternatively, because the project is funded on a unit-cost basis, any funding in the Imperial allocation for the Research Costs category that remains unspent at the end of the project will not have to be paid back to the EC and can be used to offset part of the cost of the tuition fees. Unspent in this context means that all research training activities described in the grant must first have been delivered and any balance remaining in the category can be used by the Host Institution to offset any tuition fee liability. Please also note that the amount of unspent funding cannot be confirmed until after the EC has accepted the final report, and therefore any application of unspent balance can only be applied by the Department after the end of the project.

Q: What is Department's tuition fee liability?

A: Imperial has a discount for employees, "Staff Student" scheme <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/students/fees-and-funding/tuition-fees/discounts-for-college-employees/>. MSCA DN rules are that the Host Institution must employ as staff any Doctoral Candidate that Imperial recruits in a MSCA DN. Therefore, with the application of the Staff Student scheme, the Department will have a reduced fee liability as compared to the normal fee classification that would apply. All conditions of the scheme must be satisfied for example Departments must take care to create a bespoke PhD enrolment that is exactly the 36 month duration of the recruitment (vs what might be typical 42 month PhD programmes).

Please note that Other Host Institutions within the MSCA DN Consortium may have different policies and may have a higher tuition fee liability which they will need to address themselves

Q: What funding is available?

1.1. Applicable unit contributions¹²³

The EU contribution for MSCA Doctoral Networks will take the form of unit contributions, as stipulated in Decision of 11 March 2021 authorising the use of lump sum contributions and unit contributions for Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions under the Horizon Europe Programme¹²⁴.

The following budget categories apply:

MSCA Doctoral Networks	Contributions for recruited researchers					Institutional unit contributions	
	per person-month					per person-month	
	Living allowance	Mobility allowance	Family allowance (if applicable)	Long-term leave allowance (if applicable)	Special needs allowance (if applicable)	Research, training and networking contribution	Management and indirect contribution
	EUR 4010	EUR 710	EUR 660	EUR 4720 x % covered by the beneficiary	requested unit ¹²⁵ x (1/number of months)	EUR 1600	EUR 1200

A: As set out in the MSCA Work Programme, the EC allocates the funding across two main categories: (1) contributions for recruited researcher which includes Living allowance, Mobility allowance, Family allowance (2) institutional unit contributions which includes Research, training and networking contribution and Management and indirect contribution. The funding is calculated on fixed rate unit allocations per month, for both categories.

Imperial will use the (1) contribution for recruited researcher to set the Doctoral Candidate salary and to cover any employer compulsory deductions (e.g., National Insurance). See **Q: How are the Doctoral Candidate researchers paid** below.

Imperial will use the (2) institutional Research, training and networking contribution (RTN) allocation to cover research and innovation related activities of the DC’s project. This can include conferences, workshops, networking meetings, field work, research trips, training, Seminars, lab materials/consumables, books/materials, publication costs, library records, language courses, software, consumables, membership fees. It should also be used to cover the costs of secondments lasting 6 months or less (minimum travel and accommodation). The key point is to enable the fulfilment of the planned research and training activities.

Additionally, there are several costs which will arise in all projects for which Imperial as Host Institution via the Department will be responsible. The scheme rules prevent these from being charged to or carried by the DC. These include: any visa, UK health surcharge, and travel cost to the UK that the DC incurs to take up the position; any tuition fee (see point above) for enrolment in Imperial PhD programme.

While the institution RTN allocation is theoretically available to Imperial to cover these costs, in terms of priority, the RTN funding must first be used to enable the fulfilment of the planned research and training activities. If there any remaining after the end of the project, the Department can draw on the unspent RTN allocation to cover its liability for these costs.

(The DC conversely is responsible for any visa, UK health surcharge, or travel cost for any family members. The contribution for the recruited researcher includes a family mobility allowance to anticipate these needs, which the DC will receive as salary.)

In sum, the following will be demands on the institutional allocation which you will want to consider in finalising and setting up the projects:

- costs of the research and training activities (the “lab” and training costs including secondments). These must be prioritised.
- “professional” costs necessarily incurred by the DC to take up the position (visa, health surcharge, travel to the UK)
- tuition fee incurred when the DC enrolls in the Imperial PHD programme (see point above)
- Coordinator-incurred project management costs (Imperial can agree to relinquish up to 50% of our management and indirect allocation) (see point below)
- Network wide training costs (e.g., institutional costs of organising and delivering a conference).

Q: How does the Management and Indirect cost category work in practice?

A: The Management and Indirect allocation for each Host Institution is calculated based on the number of person-months each Host Institution agrees to employ a Doctoral Candidate for. In the proposal you will see this as 1,200 Euros X person months (eg €1,200 x 36 months = €43,200 total Management and Overhead allocation for the relevant Host Institution). This allocation can be (and usually is) redistributed within the MSCA DN consortium, through written commitment in the Consortium Agreement, with the Coordinator retaining an amount to cover its costs of project managing the MSCA DN grant. The amount Coordinators request varies, but **the maximum retention by the Coordinator that Imperial can accept is 50% of the Management and Indirect allocation, or 600 Euros per person-month.**

The PI must discuss this at the proposal development stage within the Consortium and incorporate notice of any re-distribution of the Management and Indirect allocation into any Worktribe record prepared prior to proposal submission.

Q: Can other cost categories be redistributed?

A: Yes, some MSCA DN consortia also agree to redistribute part of the RTN category. This can be a good way to pay for large-scale events which benefit the whole MSCA Doctoral Network such as summer schools and conferences. There may be other reasons for a redistribution of Research Costs – for example, some partners working on theory, whilst others carry out experiments – which may mean the costs of hosting vary considerably from one organisation to another.

Discuss this at the proposal development stage within the Consortium and incorporate notice of any re-distribution of the Research Costs allocation into any Worktribe record prepared prior to proposal submission. This is particularly important if Imperial is hosting a large scale event.

Q: How are the Doctoral Candidate researchers paid?

A: As they are employees of Imperial under this action, they are paid through Payroll. The payment that they receive is a combination of Living Allowance and Mobility Allowance (plus Family Allowance, if they qualify for it). These allowances are taxed in the UK. When the Doctoral Candidate researcher is appointed, the Faculty Research Services will set an exchange rate at which the salary will be paid as EC funding rates are in Euros; if the researcher loses out compared to the

Euro amount due to fluctuations in the exchange rate, they will receive a balancing payment to make it up to the correct amount.

Q: Under what circumstances should Imperial agree to be an Associated Partner?

A: Imperial should normally be a Beneficiary on the proposal, i.e., a prospective Host Institution recruiting a Doctoral Candidate researcher(s) with the Grant funding to work at Imperial and take advantage of the training offered within the network. This is the only role which entails a Grant Agreement and funding.

There may however be circumstances under which you do not wish to recruit a researcher but still wish to have a relationship with a MSCA DN by offering to host a secondment or provide training to students within the network. In those circumstances Imperial could be an “Associated Partner”. An Associated Partner will have a relationship with the MSCA DN only and not with the EC. The MSCA DN will request Imperial PIC. As this will not be considered a Grant to Imperial College London, any such letter will need to be dealt with and approved by the Department. An Associated Partner will not sign the Grant Agreement with the EC, will have no entitlement to any budget, and therefore this may not be considered a grant to Imperial. If you choose to participate as an Associated Partner and you need to pay for costs associated with any training/secondment, that is something you would need to discuss with the network before submission.

Q: How are Associated Partners included in an application?

A: Associated Partners are added by the Coordinator on the Participants page of the proposal submission. They will need to provide their Participant Identity Code (PIC) as does a Beneficiary organisation. They must be included in the list of participating organisations in B4 (half a page per Associated Partner, see the table in the [EC’s Doctoral Network application template](#)).

The EC funded beneficiaries then secure the agreement of the Associated Partners to participate in the project (whether through offering training or secondments) using the templates provided as attachments to the Consortium Agreement, to be signed in the Grant Agreement preparation stage. A Coordinator is advised to share these templates with the prospective Associated Partner in the proposal development stage for their awareness and preparedness to commit to participate. This is the commonly used template: <https://www.kowi.de/en/kowi/proposal-project/project-implementation-1/msca-projects/msca-projects.aspx>

Q: Who pays for the cost of secondments?

A: If secondments are between partners in a network, the hosting partner will usually pay any running costs: most partners tend to have similar incoming and outgoing person months of secondments, so the net cost evens out across the network. Travel and subsistence costs are borne by the researcher’s home organisation. If incoming and outgoing secondments are not equal however, it may be possible to redistribute some of the Research Costs category by discussion within the consortium as described above.

If a secondment is to an Associated Partner they may request that some of the Research Costs go to them to contribute to the cost of that secondment; any arrangement of this type is at the discretion of the PI to agree, and he or she must ensure that any such payment does not leave them short of budget needed to complete the training of the researcher. Any payment to an Associated Partner to

should not exceed the unit cost allocation of Research Costs for the number of months the researcher is seconded.

Q: Can I apply to the Industrial Doctorates scheme?

A: You should discuss this first with your Department before confirming participation. There are three complications that might be resolvable depending on how the recruitment and secondments of the Doctoral Candidate are planned: (1) Imperial’s tuition fee discount conditions <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/students/fees-and-funding/tuition-fees/discounts-for-college-employees/> apply only where the recruited researcher is employed as a research assistant for the full duration of their PhD programme (36) months. This may be difficult to reconcile against Industrial Doctoral mode which requires 50% of the researcher’s time to be spend outside of Imperial at a non-academic host, and so risks triggering a substantial tuition fee liability to the Department; (2) Conversely, there may be difficulties reconciling time spent outside of Imperial, which is mandatory in an Industrial Doctorate, with Imperial policies on secondments and working overseas; (3) It may be difficult to reconcile the Industrial Doctorate requirement of 50% time spent outside Imperial with Registry requirements for attendance at Imperial during PhD programme. Generally an Imperial PhD researcher can’t spend more than 12 months away from Imperial; however, in these cases it is may be possible to set up Industrial Doctorate researchers on [Split PhD](#) terms but this needs to be arranged on an individual basis. Please consult with Registry.

Q: Are researchers on MSCA DN Industrial Doctorates employed by both the university and the non-academic partner respectively while they are hosted at each?

A: No, Imperial would expect to register its recruited Doctoral Candidate researcher for a PhD and employ the researcher for the full 36-month duration of their employment on the Network. The placement in the non-academic sector would be treated like a longer secondment and they would retain their employment contract at Imperial during that period. An employment period by Imperial of anything less than 36 months risks conflict with the conditions for the Tuition Fee Remission.

Q: Can another partner in the network register their students for a PhD with Imperial?

A: This cannot automatically be agreed between the Imperial PI and another partner. However it **may** be possible using Imperial’s [Partner Research Institute scheme](#) but this would need to be discussed in advance of submission. Please consult with Registry on those conditions.

Q: Who can I recruit?

A: The DC can be any nationality but must fulfil the “mobility” criteria of not having been in the recruiting country for more than 12 months in the 36 months preceding their employment start date. The recruitment must also be widely advertised. Imperial will recruit the DC as a member of staff who is then enrolled at Imperial for a PhD.

Q: What visa applies?

A: The DC you recruit might need a visa to take up UK employment. Please factor some allowance for

this in the project start month/recruitment launch/and DC individual project start dates to allow for those processes to complete and the person to finish their 36-month PhD project within the overall 48-month project period. Guidance on visa routes is available here <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/human-resources/compliance-and-immigration/> as well as on the Royal Society website here <https://royalsociety.org/grants-schemes-awards/global-talent-visa/> It appears GTV Route 3 is applicable to Doctoral Candidate researchers employed as Research Assistants in a MSCA DN funded by Horizon Europe.

Q: When can I start *recruitment* of my Doctoral Candidate researcher?

A: The EC must first sign the Grant Agreement (the project does not legally exist until there is a signed GA), which is anticipated ~June/July. Then, you must align your Doctoral Candidate (DC) recruitment plan with start of the project. Partners do not typically launch DC recruitment until after the project start date because a first action in the project is for the participating PIs to meet to discuss a recruitment strategy and communications (e.g., advertisement, project and consortium description). If the Consortium chooses a project start month of 1st October, then a recruitment would typically be launched soon thereafter. Projects run for 48 months, and DC are employed for 36 months within that 48-month period.

As an example, many projects have a start date pushed back to the new year following proposal outcomes, with a 6-month lead in for recruitment.

Q: How should I complete section A of the proposal?

A: Please consult the Guide to Completing the Part A on the [Participating in Horizon Europe](#) page, Proposal Submission tab here.

The main queries on this section have been on the ‘Participants’ (section 2) and ‘Ethics and Security’ (section 4):

Section 2 – Participants

- The ‘main contact person’ for the purposes of this application should be the PI. This will be the person who receives any messages about this application via the Portal.

Acronym **TEST DN**

Short name **Imperial**

Role of participating organisation in the project

Project management	<input type="checkbox"/>
Communication, dissemination and engagement	<input type="checkbox"/>
Provision of research and technology infrastructure	<input type="checkbox"/>
Co-definition of research and market needs	<input type="checkbox"/>
Civil society representative	<input type="checkbox"/>
Policy maker or regulator, incl. standardisation body	<input type="checkbox"/>
Research performer	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Technology developer	<input type="checkbox"/>
Testing/validation of approaches and ideas	<input type="checkbox"/>
Prototyping and demonstration	<input type="checkbox"/>
IPR management incl. technology transfer	<input type="checkbox"/>
Public procurer of results	<input type="checkbox"/>
Private buyer of results	<input type="checkbox"/>
Finance provider (public or private)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Education and training	<input type="checkbox"/>
Contributions from the social sciences or/and the humanities	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other	<input type="checkbox"/>
If yes, please specify: (Maximum number of characters allowed: 50)	

- In the 'Role of participating organisation in the project' table (see above), you should tick 'research performer' as this is a research project – also tick any other roles that Imperial will fulfil in this project (e.g. 'education and training' is typical in this type of MSCA DN project). Please note that this information is for Commission record-keeping only, so this is not material in the evaluation of the proposal.
- You will then be asked to list five publications, five relevant projects or activities, and any relevant infrastructure or equipment to be used in this proposal. You should complete these from the point of view of your group or department, so the PI's or group's publications are the appropriate ones to use. As regards projects, note that this is not simply limited to EC-funded projects, they can be from any funder but again need to be relevant to the current PI and department. You can refer to the figures given in the first

part of this FAQ show Imperial’s overall experience in hosting this type of project.

List of up to 5 publications, widely-used datasets, software, goods, services, or any other achievements relevant to the call content.

Type of achievement	Short description (Max 500 characters)	Add
▼		

List of up to 5 most relevant previous projects or activities, connected to the subject of this proposal.

Name of Project or Activity	Short description (Max 500 characters)	Add

Description of any significant infrastructure and/or any major items of technical equipment, relevant to the proposed work.

Name of infrastructure of equipment	Short description (Max 300 characters)	Add

- For the Gender Equality Plan question, you can tick ‘yes’.

Gender Equality Plan



Does the organization have a Gender Equality Plan (GEP) covering the elements listed below? Yes No

Minimum requirements (building blocks) for a GEP

Public GEP: formal document published on the institutions website and signed by the top management, addressing the following issues:

- **Dedicated resources:** commitment of human resources and gender expertise to implement it.
- **Data collection and monitoring:** sex/gender disaggregated data on personnel and students and annual reporting based on indicators.
- **Training:** Awareness raising/trainings on gender equality and unconscious gender biases for staff and decision-makers.
- **Minimum areas to be covered** and addressed via concrete measures and targets:
 - o work-life balance and organisational culture;
 - o gender balance in leadership and decision-making;
 - o gender equality in recruitment and career progression;
 - o integration of the gender dimension into research and teaching content;
 - o measures against gender-based violence including sexual harassment.

Section 4 – Ethics and Security

- The UK is no longer a member state, so you will need to tick ‘yes’ to any relevant sections in which Imperial will be involved, e.g. import/export of personal data, import/export of materials.
- If you do need access to any information that is defined as ‘EUCI’, please note that the UK does have a security of Information agreement with the UK, which you can find [on the EU’s website](#). As the technical expert on your area of the application, it is up to you to understand whether any ethics or security issues are raised. For an explanation of the issues that the Commission is trying to capture in these tables, see the relevant part of the [Horizon Europe Programme Guide](#).

UKRO Guidance Notes 2024

1. MSCA Doctoral Networks 2024 Call Information Webinar: Session 1

<https://www.ukro.ac.uk/events/msca-doctoral-networks-2024-call-information-webinar-session-1/>

Presentation slides https://www.ukro.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/thomas_vyzikas_final.pdf

2. MSCA Doctoral Networks 2024 Call Information Webinar: Session 2

<https://www.ukro.ac.uk/events/msca-doctoral-networks-2024-call-information-webinar-session-2/>

Presentation slides <https://www.ukro.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/MSCA-DN-2024-Submission-Evaluation-and-Proposal-Development.pdf>

3. MSCA Doctoral Networks Post-Award Factsheet

https://www.ukro.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/factsheet_heu_msca_post_award_DN.pdf

4. MSCA NCP Network handbook (drafting guidance for 2023, applicable for ongoing calls)

https://msca-net.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/MSCANET_DN2023_final.pdf