Suggestions for the Future Orientation of the Marie Curie Actions in FP7

This document is the result of discussions within the Administrative and Advisory Boards of the Marie Curie Fellowship Association (MCFA), following the European Stakeholders meeting on the future orientations for the Marie Curie Actions in FP7 (Brussels, December 2004). We appreciate the fact that our organisation has been consulted on this matter and is given the opportunity to provide feedback based on the experience we have gained as fellows and through our work for the Association. Along these lines, we comment on the current implementation of the Marie Curie Actions and on some aspects of their proposed new format in FP7, and we put forward a number of suggestions. We also make a proposal on how the long-term effect of scientific mobility could be enhanced by offering better networking opportunities to mobile researchers.

A. Comments on the proposed changes for the Marie Curie Actions

1. Individual Marie Curie Fellowships and co-funding of national or international research programmes.

As has been pointed out by the MCFA at many occasions, there is an urgent need to increase the level of research funding at national level, including fellowships for research and research training. National programmes need to become more open to applicants from other countries, and in many cases the evaluation procedures need to be drastically improved in order to ensure a fair and transparent selection.

We recognise that there are problems also at the level of the Marie Curie fellowships regarding the evaluation process and the implementation (which are, however, more of a practical nature rather than due to structural weaknesses). Nevertheless, the individual fellowships within the Marie Curie Actions do fulfil most of the requirements that ought to be satisfied also by national or other international schemes (see below), and it would be very desirable to have more programmes of this type. Consequently, we welcome the idea of giving a financial incentive to national or international funding bodies by offering a certain amount of co-funding for programmes similar to the Marie Curie individual fellowships, provided this is conceived as an additional measure and not as a replacement of the particularly successful individual Marie Curie fellowships (the preparatory document, however, speaks of “phasing out the individual fellowships during a transition period”). We would also like to stress that such Community co-funding should under no circumstances be used as an excuse to reduce the overall amount of funding from national sources.

We strongly believe that the individual fellowship schemes within the Marie Curie programme should be maintained in a format similar to the one that is currently implemented, for the following reasons:

- The “Marie Curie” label has become a label of excellence and the Marie Curie Individual Fellowships have achieved a high level of recognition throughout Europe and beyond. Currently the Commission is entirely responsible for the selection of the proposals through independent experts. It therefore has a direct control over the quality of the selection procedure and the criteria used, ensuring that the Marie Curie label is reserved for projects fulfilling very high international standards. In fact, although the term “Marie Curie fellowship” was already introduced in 1997, it is only now that the fellowships have achieved the level of recognition that they deserve, and there is still more work to be done. Replacing the scheme entirely by a co-funding scheme implies the serious risk of losing this level of recognition.

- We have come a very long way from the earlier framework programmes. Marie Curie fellows are now developing a sense of belonging to a larger European community of researchers. By having the common label “Marie Curie” for a whole family of actions addressing researchers at any stage of their career (early-stage, mid-career or senior researchers), it is also becoming more and more visible that the fellowships are part of a broader European strategy. The Intra-European Individual Fellowships have
always been the flagship in this family of actions. Abolishing them would be detrimental to the label ‘Marie Curie’ and to the success of the strategy behind it.

- The Marie Curie Fellowships have developed a number of particularly positive features for individual applicants, which should become guiding principles for researcher recruitment and which will be put at risk if individual fellowships are completely outsourced. In particular:
  - They are entirely bottom-up (i.e. in principle it is possible for an individual to apply with a project from any discipline with a completely free choice of host country and host institution, from either public or private sector, for a freely chosen duration within the overall limits of the programme).
  - The evaluations are performed by international groups of independent experts. The selection is based on scientific merit, keeping in mind the long-term career impact on the fellow as well as the significance of the project for European research and the development of the European Research Area. Local interests and dynamics do not play any role in the selection.
  - There are clear rules regarding the application procedure, the evaluation and selection process, and the implementation, including salary levels and working conditions, and these rules are the same for all applicants, regardless of their origin or discipline.

- Individual fellowships are an important policy instrument, where at the moment the Commission (together with the Programme Committee) has complete control over the design of the programme. This implies a certain flexibility and enables relatively quick adjustments in order to respond to changing framework conditions or the development of different needs on the side of the ‘users’. The direct contact with contractors and fellows implied by the central administration of applications and contracts within the Commission, as well as the follow-up monitoring allow for direct feedback “from the shop floor”. This leads to the continuous improvement of the scheme, ensuring that it responds to the real needs of the researchers and develops a maximal effectiveness at European level. While it is possible to obtain valuable feedback also from the participating co-funded national/international schemes, in view of the huge differences between the various schemes, the collection of fragmented feedback will never be able to provide an overall Europe-wide picture.

We are aware of the fact that the current administrative workload connected with the individual applications and contracts is the source of many problems and uses up a lot of resources within the Commission. However, we feel that ‘outsourcing’ the individual fellowships (programme design, advertising of opportunities and deadlines, selection of candidates, implementation of contracts, follow-up after the fellowship etc.) is not the right way to address this problem. A simplification of administrative procedures and a suitable increase in specifically trained staff (i.e. with a background in research management and administration) could help a lot in making the current system of Individual Marie Curie fellowships sustainable.

One of the reasons why the individual fellowships within the Marie Curie Actions are so oversubscribed is the lack of adequate programmes offered by other organisations. If the co-funding strategy works, it is to be expected that the problem of the oversubscription will automatically be resolved, which would eliminate the need for a further “externalisation” of the individual fellowships that are currently administrated centrally by the Commission. However, this will only work if the different co-funded programmes and the European Marie Curie scheme are closely co-ordinated and a mechanism is introduced that prevents multiple applications in parallel. Otherwise the availability of more opportunities will lead to an even greater total number of applications.

2. Marie Curie Networks for early-stage researchers

The proposal for the new Marie Curie Networks in FP7 tries to combine various actions that are currently available independently, namely the Host Fellowships for Early Stage Research Training, the Research Training Networks, the Chairs and the Conferences and Training Courses. While we agree that duplication in different schemes should be avoided, we have some reservations regarding certain changes:

- The current actions EST and RTN focus on different aspects: While ESTs offer structured training at
a single institution or a small number of partner sites, RTNs focus on learning research by doing research within a larger (multinational) framework, where experienced researchers (post-docs) can also participate. We consider that within the new MCNs the focus ought to remain on high quality research, and that, consequently, networks ought to remain open to more advanced researchers.

- Only excellent researchers can provide high quality research training. Thus, the focus on research in the MCNs should be reflected in the evaluation criteria, which ought to put more emphasis on the scientific quality of the prospective trainers. In order to give added value to the network as such, the existence of a common research line (if not a common research project) among the different partners involved should also be required.

- Offering the opportunity to recruit visiting Chairs within a MCN could add an interesting new dimension to the scheme and could enhance the scientific quality of the research training offered. However, it should not replace the current Marie Curie Chairs programme (see below).

- In general, the scheme should be flexible enough to allow for applications both by single institutions that already belong to an international (formal or informal) network and by veritable multinational networks.

3. Expanding the industry dimension of the Marie Curie Actions within FP7 and the Industry Host Fellowship Scheme

As a general comment, we think that the term “industry” in some Commission documents including the preparatory papers regarding the future of the Marie Curie Actions in FP7 does not fully match the connotation that many researchers have for this word. Although there is a clear definition of industry as “privately funded commercial entity”, it may be more appropriate to use the terms “private sector” or “commercial entity” instead.

- Regarding the new Industry-Academia Partnership Scheme, we strongly welcome the proposed change to enable the recruitment of researchers from outside the partnership. This will make the scheme more attractive both to industrial and to academic entities and may help to increase the participation rate of industry in the Marie Curie Actions.

- However, on practical grounds it may be easier to achieve a stronger participation of industry through mono-partner schemes similar to the successful Industry Host fellowships of FP5, which do not involve complex administrative procedures with other institutions. In such a case strict criteria ought to be imposed to ensure the training value of the fellowships and the effective transfer of knowledge between academia and industry. The results of the recent IMPAFEL study could be very useful in this respect.

- The Marie Curie Actions can only make a small contribution to intensifying intersectorial mobility. In order to achieve better results in this respect and a higher investment in R&D from the private sector, more efforts are needed at national level, for example through fiscal incentives.

4. Realising the full research potential of EU25

- We particularly welcome the proposal to enable the recruitment of nationals of the host country as a “brain return measure”, provided the person has been outside the home country for a sufficiently long period. This scheme will be even more successful if the proposed flexibility (splitting the stay into a series of shorter periods) finds its way into the final proposal.

- Regarding the organisation of workshops and conferences, we feel that it is essential to allow for the funding of junior researchers from other countries in order to attend these events. The current imbalance in the flux of researchers between east and west is to a large extent due to the lack of awareness of what the eastern European countries have to offer, and short stays during conferences could contribute significantly to the removal of prejudices especially among younger researchers.

- Finally, we believe that the proposed evaluation facility could be of great benefit especially (but not
only) to institutions in the qualifying regions of the scheme. However, in order to ensure an optimal use of resources, there should be at least a minimal requirement for follow-up action on the side of the benefiting institution.

5. The international dimension of the Marie Curie Actions within FP7

- The proposed increased flexibility in the outgoing/incoming international fellowships as regards the total duration and the possible mixing of outgoing and return phase are very welcomed. It will allow fellows to design the fellowship in a tailor-made fashion in accordance with the needs of their research project and at the same time facilitate the life of fellows with families and ease their reintegration after the end of the project.

- We also strongly support the proposal to reduce to three years the required time outside of Europe in order to be eligible for the International Reintegration Grants. The current minimum time of five years is too long. A researcher who has been outside of Europe for such a long time is not very likely to return unless excellent conditions (in addition to the IRG) are offered. On the other hand, after three years the roots in the new country are not yet as deep and contacts to the European researcher community are still sufficiently strong to make the IRG a realistic incentive to look for opportunities to return to Europe.

6. The future of the “excellence measures” within the Marie Curie Actions

While no explicit mention of the future of the “excellence measures” within the Marie Curie Actions has been made in any of the background papers, it was said at the Stakeholders Meeting that neither the Marie Curie Excellence Teams nor the Marie Curie Chairs will be continued in FP7, while the Marie Curie Excellence Awards may be opened up to a broader group of mobile researchers.

- We do not think that it is a good idea to abolish the Excellence Teams, as they constitute a logical part of the Marie Curie Actions programme as a means for the establishment of a longer-term career path for researchers. It is true that currently only a small group of people can benefit from the programme due to its limited budget, and that this action could be taken up by the ERC instead. However, just like the Marie Curie Chairs, Excellence Teams symbolise the integrity of the Marie Curie Actions as a measure that caters to researchers at all stages of their career (including the promotion of excellence at world class level among mid-career and senior researchers).

- We also think that the Marie Curie Chairs as an independent action line should be maintained. In the current format they allow even smaller institutions that do excellent research but do not have the infrastructures that would allow them to take part in a MCN, to attract world class researchers to boost their training level. Eliminating this programme would affect in particular the research areas that are not in the mainstream and where not many MCNs can be expected to be implemented.

- During the Stakeholders Meeting it was mentioned that the Marie Curie Excellence Awards might be opened up to mobile researchers other than those previously funded within the Marie Curie programme. We agree that there are many other valuable mobility and research training schemes, which can lead to excellent research just like the Marie Curie fellowships. However, the purpose of the Marie Curie Excellence Awards is not only to acknowledge excellent research, but also to give visibility to the Marie Curie Actions and to raise awareness for the long-lasting impact that a Marie Curie fellowship (and not just any mobility measure) can have on the scientific career of the grant holder. In order to fulfil this double purpose, it is essential that the restriction of the award to researchers who have previously benefited from a Marie Curie fellowship be maintained.

B. Proposal for a new activity/accompanying measure to support the networking of mobile researchers

The importance of transnational, interdisciplinary, and intersectorial mobility as a means to enhancing European research capacity and the establishment of the European Research Area is getting more and more recognised. Many obstacles to mobility have been identified and are being tackled. The set-up of the European Researchers’
Mobility Portal and the creation of the ERA-MORE European Network of Mobility Centres have been important steps in this direction. At the 1st Annual Conference of the ERA-MORE Network in Baden/Austria the topic of “networking between mobile researchers” has been extensively discussed, and the importance of creating a sense of community among mobile researchers was pointed out at several occasions.

We therefore propose to include a new action under the header of “Networking support for mobile researchers” in the Marie Curie Actions of FP7, either as an independent action, or in the form of a Specific Support Action.

- This networking support scheme should be a veritable bottom-up action open to grass-roots organisations and even groups of individuals.
- It ought to be open to all activities that support the networking of mobile researchers, including European researchers who are currently based outside of Europe. This would include e.g.
  - meetings at national or regional level designed to share experiences and create links between different organisations;
  - publication of a regular newsletter informing mobile researchers of matters of specific interest;
  - establishment and maintenance of databases of mobile researchers;
  - set-up of electronic communication platforms for mobile researchers;
  - design and implementation of surveys in order to gain a better insight into the needs of mobile researchers, and the dissemination of their results;
  - support to the basic running costs of organisations specifically concerned with the networking of mobile researchers, and promotional activities to increase their visibility among the target group of mobile researchers of all sectors and disciplines;
  - etc.
- The scheme should be independent from the other Marie Curie Actions, have a simple structure with an opportunity for an ongoing submission of proposals and short evaluation and decision times.
- It should allow even for small projects to be funded. Many grass-roots organisations do not have the resources to launch big projects that require a lot of investment in terms of human resources, prefinancing etc. Nevertheless, their activities can be extremely useful to facilitate the integration of mobile researchers at local or regional level by putting them into contact with each other.
- The scheme should allow for the integration of alumni of mobility programmes and returnees in all activities, in order to benefit from their experiences and thereby give added value to the networking activities concerned.

It is evident that many of the activities above have already been implemented to some extent by the MCFA, or could potentially be set-up by us. However, the reason why we propose this new support scheme is not primarily the search for funding for our own organisation, but the evident need for better networking facilities for all mobile researchers (not only Marie Curie fellows), at all possible levels, and through a multitude of actors.

We will be happy to provide more input on any of the topics raised in this document.

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