Lived experience of MSCA Doctoral Networks at Stellenbosch University, South Africa

MSCA-GLOPOL Regional Flagship event in the African Union, Nairobi 20 May 2026



Lizél Senekal
Manager: Multi-national Grants
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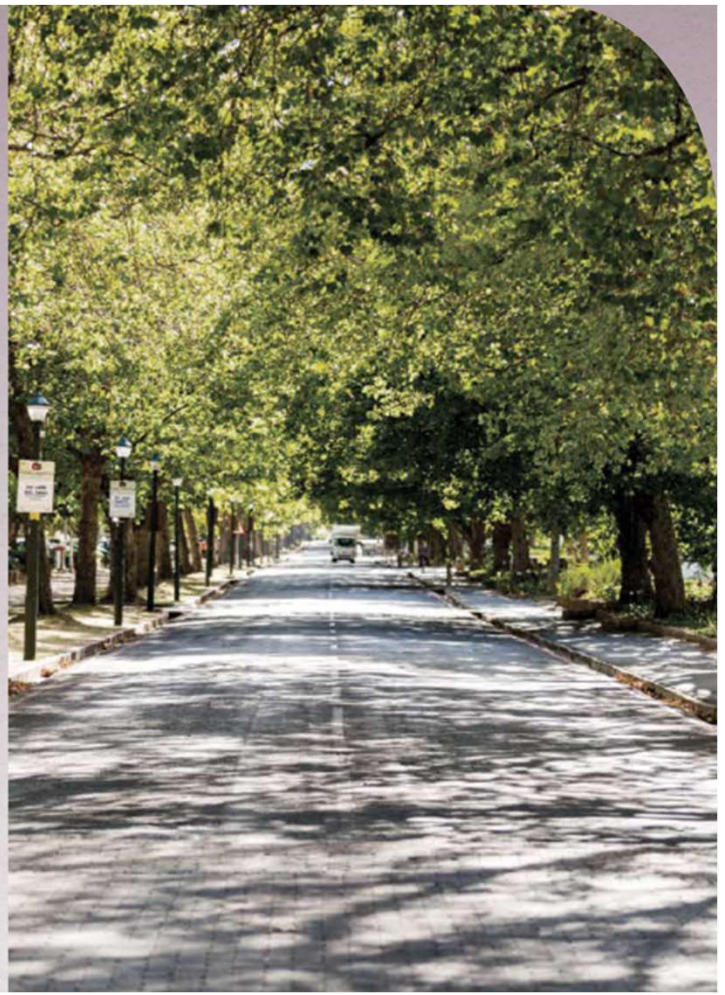
This presentation

- Overview of Stellenbosch University
- SU participation & management of EU grants
- MSCA grants at SU
- Detailed lived experience of Doctoral Networks
- The positives of joining a Doctoral Network

Stellenbosch
UNIVERSITY
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UNIVERSITEIT

ABOUT STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY

- More than **35,000** students
- A **research-intensive**, **globally ranked university**
- Known for **world-class knowledge production** and cutting-edge technological innovation
- Responsive to complex local and global challenges through **impactful**, **inclusive research**



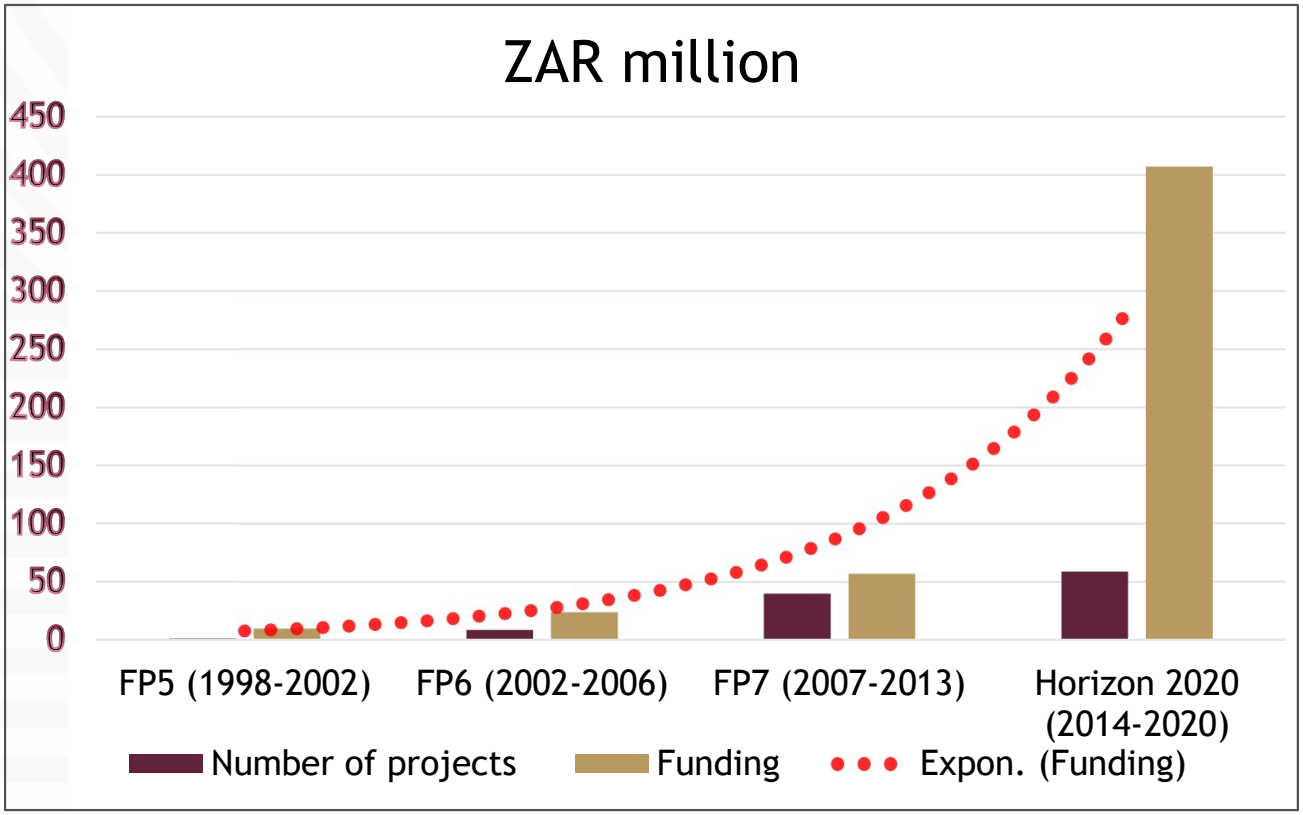
Striving for excellence & collaboration

- Research outputs (2025 for 2024 publications) – 4300
- Research contract – 1600 on average over 2 years
- 53 research chairs
- Bilateral partner institutions – 406
- Bilateral partnerships with African institutions



EU grants at Stellenbosch University from 1998 to 2020

Exponential growth since EU-SA S&T Agreement 1997



Stellenbosch UNIVERSITY IYUNIVESITHI UNIVERSITEIT

EU related grants at Stellenbosch University 2026

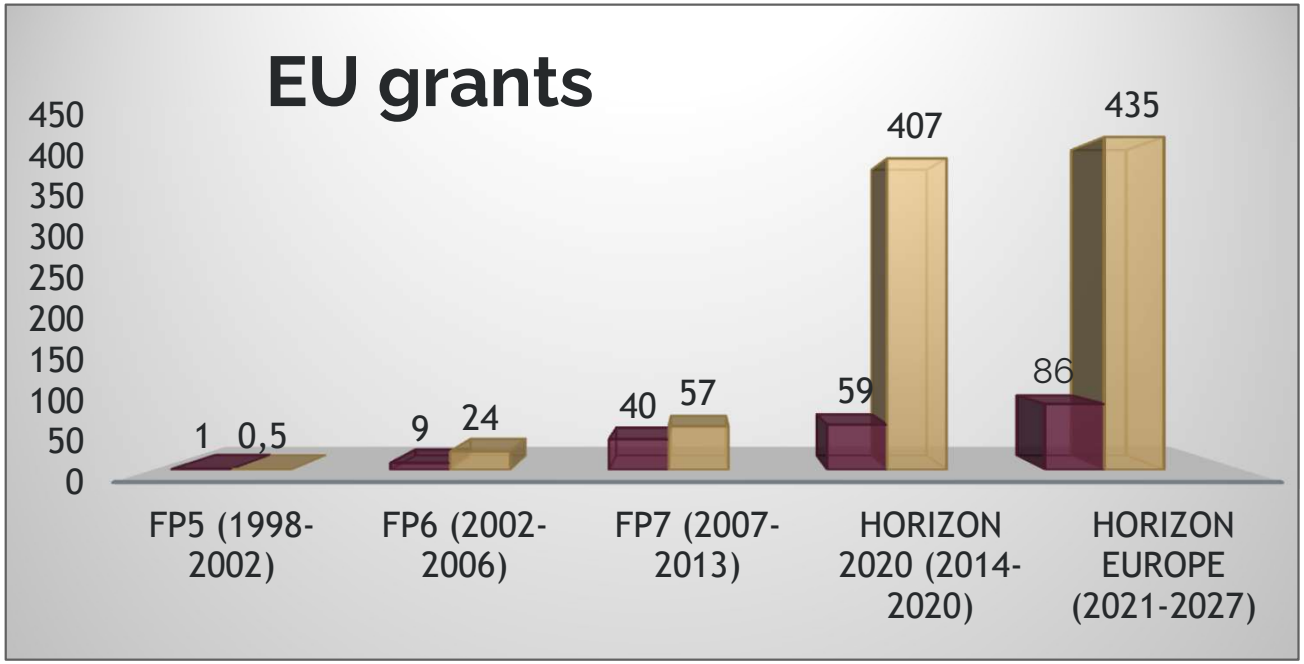
Horizon Europe
Framework Programme

&

EU-SA Joint Programmes

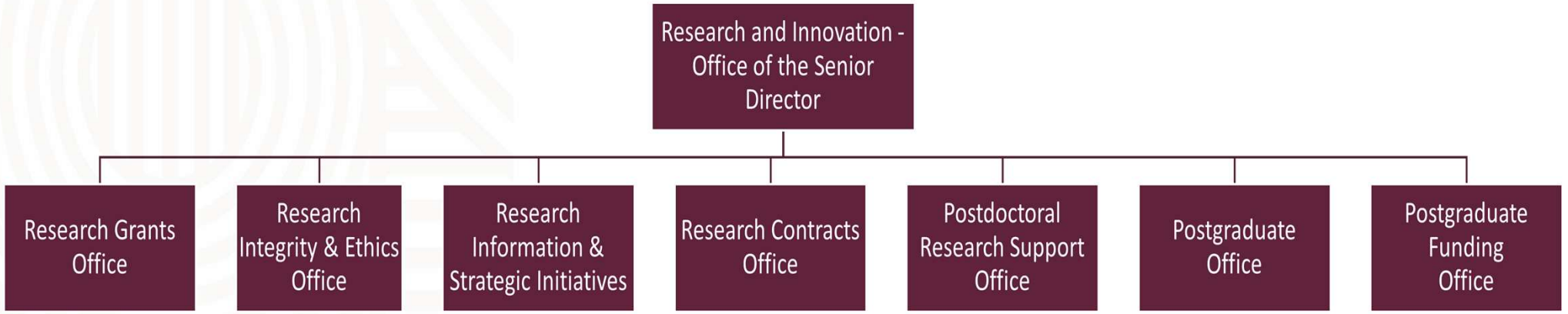
Full period (2021-2025)

86 grants



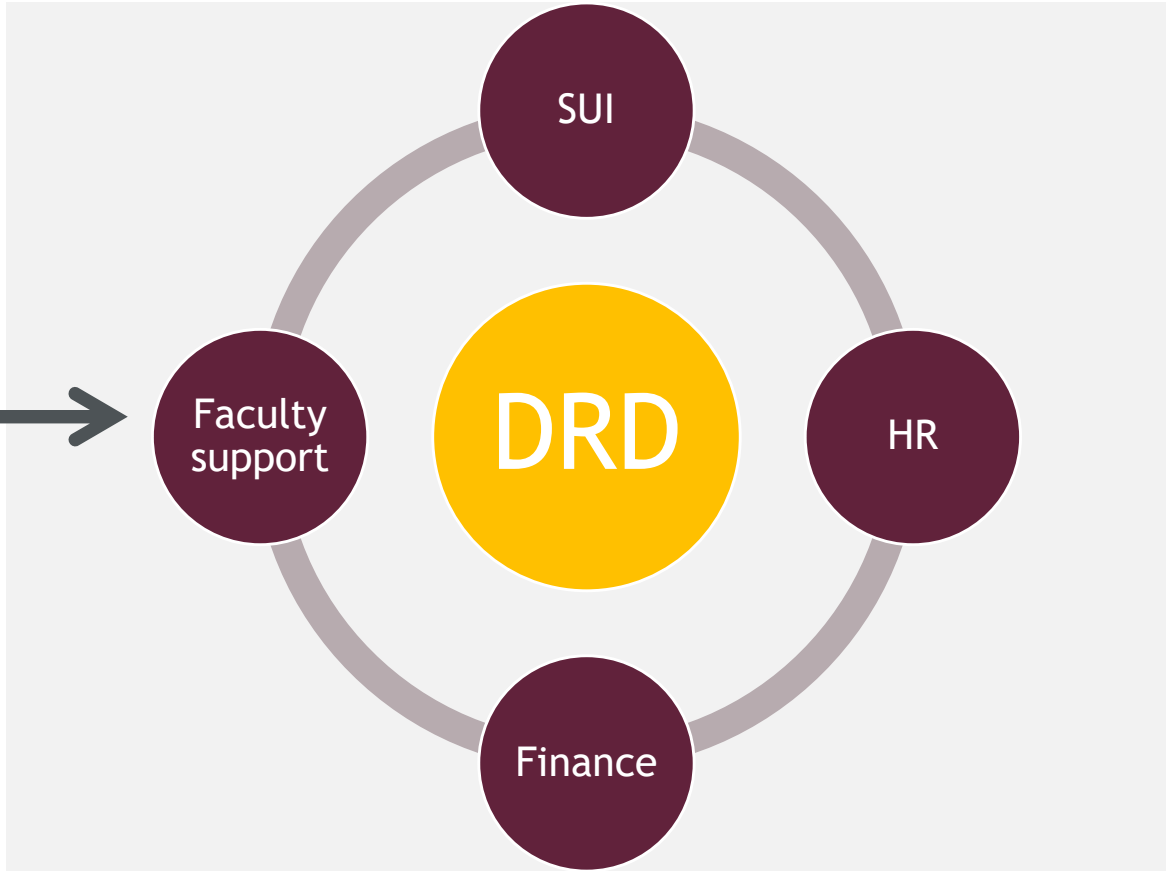
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Division for Research Development Organogram: EU Grants Office



Inter-institutional collaboration to support our researchers in MSCA

10 Academic Faculties
&
2 Schools
Data Science & Computational Thinking
&
Climate Studies



DRD Research Management provides wide spectrum of support



- DRD Information Sessions
- DRD ListServ platform
- EURAXESS – all relevant sessions, newsletters, web pages



- MSCA newsletters, web pages
- EU Funding & Tenders Portal
- Research Connect



- Host international visitors
- Focus on international partnerships

SU support on building partnerships/networks

- SU International Office; CCA
- Existing partnerships
- Visiting researchers
- Invited by EU countries
- EU funding & tenders portal – Partner Search
- E+ Mobility
- Emphasise certain calls: COST Actions, CSA, MCSA-SE
- Host & collaborate in international events



MSCAdvocacy

Stellenbosch UNIVERSITY IYUNIVESITHI UNIVERSITEIT

science, technology & innovation
Department:
Science, Technology and Innovation
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

Fostering South African participation in the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions and Horizon Europe



Roundtable

• 25 November 2024 • 9:00-12:45 SAST

STIAS Stellenbosch University, South Africa and online

www.mscadvocacy.eu @mscadvocacy @mscadvocacy

Network: STIAS2
PW: Conference 24!

MSCA GLOPOL
GLOBAL POLICY & PROMOTION

MSCA-Staff Exchanges Webinar for South Africa

Wednesday, 11 March 2026
14:00 – 16:00 (SA time)
13:00 – 15:00 (Brussels time)

AGENDA

Registration link (Free):

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdxCeA7aV_0IYek01xKU5YjBhpVLj5lAG8jrAiKZ6jj1Kj5Vw/viewform?usp=sharing&ouid=103472411648309458493

Online access (Zoom link): ***https://euconf-eu.zoom.us/j/89231268988***

Participants: All Interested!

Time	Agenda item	Presenter & notes
14:00 - 14:10	Welcome and opening remarks • Introduction of the webinar objectives • Overview of the MSCA GLOPOL project	Dr. Yedilfana Setarge, Regional Liaison Officer, MSCA GLOPOL for South Africa/African Union Ms. Tugela Matubatuba, Director for Strategic Partnership, DSTI South Africa
14:10 - 14:30	Introduction to MSCA and the MSCA Staff Exchanges scheme	Dora Czifra, MSCA Unit, European Commission DG Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC)
14:30 - 15:00	MSCA Staff Exchanges 2026 call overview and novelties • Call objectives and priorities • Eligibility and participation requirements • Evaluation process	Nancy Dzokoto Pomenya, European Research Executive Agency (REA)
15:00 - 15:20	Stellenbosch University's experience • Institutional approach to securing funding • Secondment and mobility experience • Beneficiary testimonial and lessons learned	Lizél Senekal, Manager: Multi-National Grants, and an MSCA SE beneficiary, Stellenbosch University
15:20 - 15:40	Practical session: EU Funding and Tender Portal navigation • Searching for 2026 MSCA call • Partner search guidance	Dr. Yedilfana Setarge, Regional Liaison Officer, MSCA GLOPOL for South Africa/African Union

The MSCA storyline at Stellenbosch University

- SU's participation in MSCA DN
- Challenges
- What do we not fully understand?
- Solutions
- The positives of participating in MSCA DN
- Recommendations

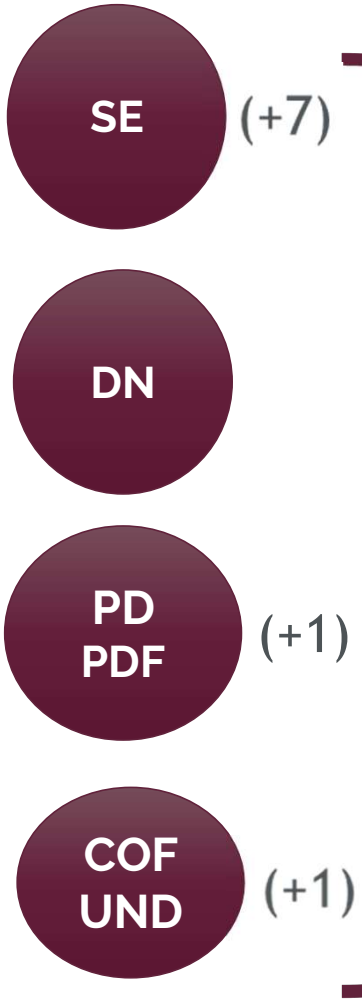
Previous MSCA grants at SU: 21

FP7 (2007-2013)
12 x IRSES
1 X ITN

Horizon 2020 (2014-2020)
6 x RISE
2 X Doctoral Networks



Current HE MSCA grants at SU



Staff Exchanges

Horizon Europe: 8

Submitted 27

Doctoral Networks

Horizon Europe: 4

Submitted 34

Total MSCA grants at SU in Horizon Europe
71 applied for and 13 awarded (18.3%)

MSCA Action	APPLIED FOR	SUCCESSFUL (In submission)
DN	34	4
SE	27	8 (+7)
PDF	8	1 (+1)
COFUND	2	0 (+1)

Erasmus + CBHE x 15

CBHE Managed by the DRD

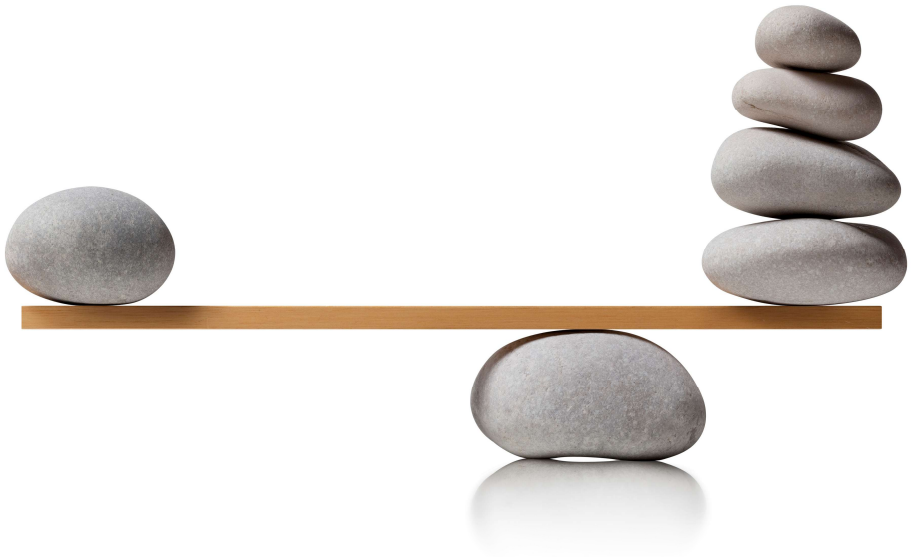
E+ Mobility opportunities Managed by the SU International Office

Doctoral Networks at SU

- DN 2020 - 2 x Skills4Action (Italy)
- DN 2021 – N4N (Belgium) & CIRCOPAV (Spain)
- DN 2022 – 2 X Eco2Wine (Italy)
- DN 2024 - rejected: 6
- DN 2025 - rejected: 15

Challenges

Finding synergy on international level, national level and institutional level



Challenges/uncertainties/ complications

EU MSCA Rules and Regulations

SA National DHA visa requirements

Institutional rules & regulations: appointment

FTContract









Challenges: EU

- **PhD appointment** as employee
- **Uncertainties/grey areas also** by EU partners/NCP:
  - One/two degree awarding institution(s)
  - DN standard/Joint Degree with 2 supervisors
  - Associate/BENs
  - Contracts!
- **Secondments** from SA to EU countries are difficult: living allowance (based on country correction 63% for SA), but DC must do secondments to countries with higher living costs
- **Mobility:** public transport in SA vs Europe

Challenges: DHA

- Very long **waiting period** for SA visas – implications on start of the project
- Uncertainty on which **type of VISA** for DN (e.g. tax implications)

- **Solution**: after months of consultation with 35+ persons, DHA provided a Directive to the Vice-Chancellor of Stellenbosch University specifically for DN candidates
- Paved the way for other SA institutions to participate in DN

Challenges: Institutional - FTC

- EU & SU uncertainty about the **type of contract**: Fellowship A or B; EU legal team finally conceded to a **Fixed Term Contract**
- **Salary**:
  No increase of salary over 3 year period
  EU exchange rates implications left to BENs. SU to adopt methodology for exchange rates losses
- **Health insurance** private vs Public Health (SA vs Europe)
- Pension Funds (choice)
- **Academic calendar differences**: SU to accommodate EU academic calendars in SA. Affects institutional processes & timelines of PhD registration.

- **Solution**: Designated staff members to attend to DN matters: HR, Finance, Faculty support, DRD various clusters (GO/Contracts/Postgrad), Project Manager/researchers.
- Create a SOP for DNs.

The positives of a DN

- Ongoing academic **networking/consortium** opportunities for both the PI's and DCs
- Long term **transdisciplinary** partnerships
- The value of **in-person meetings**: helps to ensure strong network collaborations and provide sustainability of relationships post project period
- From a Science Communication perspective: the strong emphasis of communication provides a **focussed directive of science engagement as an integral part of research**.
- Staff Exchanges: also advantages for admin/staff/technical,

Recommendations from DN PI's

Secondments 3 month periods:

- For SSH, this is too long, suggest 2-month periods instead
- For Natural Science, suggest a 3 months+ period, because it is hard to generate data in three months or less when working in an unfamiliar lab or environment.

Mobility funds from SA to EU countries should be adjusted for global north expenditures.

DN students should be funded for 4 years. They spend significant time on traveling, training and generating data in several labs. In principle, it's a great idea and a superb opportunity, but almost impossible if the PhD needs to be finalized in 3 years.

Suggestions for SA students to apply for DN?

Difficult for SU to support our own students to engage in a DN, even in Africa.

- SA students can only participate in a DN if existing collaborations between EU & SU researchers are already established

- Participation is also complicated by language & geographical differences – SA vs Europe. (For SA: visiting home in 3 years is expensive.)

In summary



Challenges place an **extra-ordinary high operational burden** on Third Country applicants and their universities, including grant managers, scientists, faculty support managers, HR & Finance staff.



Positives relate especially to **international, multi-disciplinary collaboration/networking/communicating.**



MSCA represents the most international components of all Horizon Europe opportunities, and 42% of all researchers involved in MSCA programmes are from non-EU countries. Against this background, and taking into account the mentioned challenges, should the MSCA Global North-South alignment not perhaps be **reshaped for African Third Country realities** in the next FP10?

Contact



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