

RELAX 101072456

Recommendations/feedback after the mid-term check meeting of 03 July 2024 – Brussels

Venue: The Office of Northern Ireland Executive, Chaussée d’Etterbeek 180, 1040 Brussels

Purpose: The MTR meeting is a contractual obligation defined by the article 19 of the grant agreement. It represents the opportunity to launch a constructive dialogue between the network participants and the Research Executive Agency. It is a valuable source of feedback to both the consortium and the Research Executive Agency (REA).

The project officer was given the opportunity to meet the project beneficiaries, the PIs as well as the fellows and to assess the project's progress on scientific and training deliverables, fulfilment of the recruitment plan, working conditions of the fellows, compliance of the consortium with the grant agreement and observation of the researchers' rights.

Feedback

1. It is worth noting that all participants provided a good presentation on their expected role in the project.
2. It is worth noting that all DCs gave very good presentations on their projects. They are well embedded in the project's overall design and implementation, with clearly defined research objectives and well-planned interactions between their individual projects.
3. It was commendable that the coordinator's report elaborated on all necessary points for the meeting.
4. The scope and focus of the project were clearly presented.
5. Recruitment process was reported in line with the applicable rules and eligibility conditions. All DCs were recruited between 1st September 2023 and 1st May 2024. Delayed recruitment for DCs 5 (ICCS), was due to local formal recruitment procedures with a single hiring period of PhD students with a deadline in September. In the first round, none of the applicants satisfied neither the academic requirements for admission nor the mobility and full-time RELAX-DN requirements. In the second round which was exceptional and completed end of April, a suitable candidate formally accepted the position by end of April. Delayed in recruitment for DCs 6 and 7 (TDC) were due to VISA application process in IE.
6. All due deliverables and milestones were submitted requiring only minor changes. D6.4 was submitted M14 instead of M12, and D6.5 was submitted M15 instead of M13 due to late recruitments at ICCS and TCD. Milestones 2, 10, 11, affected by the late recruitments, have also been achieved.
7. The first training days, held for all DCs recruited on 18-22 March 2024 at Queen's University of Belfast, were focused on induction and transferable skills. DCs 5, 6, 7 were not recruited at that time and could not participate but all the related material is made available to them.
8. Planned network activities have been properly presented.
9. Secondments planning has been also properly presented.

Recommendations:

1. Recruitment of DCs under an employment contract: double check and ensure with each beneficiary that all DCs are properly contracted and that all elements mentioned in Annex 5 of the GA appear in the contract. If, for national/institutional reasons, it is not possible to lay down in the contract the MSCA working requirements, an addendum to the contract, where all those requirements are stated, should be added.

2. Beneficiary ICSS: please provide further clarifications/explanations on the reasons for the low number of applications received and the local recruitment procedure.
3. D7.1 'OEI Requirement': based on the guide for EA/EAB published in the portal¹ the appointed ethics advisor should be independent and external to the project and to the department(s) or group(s) conducting the research for reasons of independency and impartiality. To be independent, EA may not have any conflict of interests in relation to the project or its Beneficiaries. Conflict of interest may arise from any economic interests, from any professional or financial constraints, from family or other personal links, or from any other relationships or common interests which may compromise the independent nature of the advisory work performed as well as of the report(s) to be submitted to the Executive Agency. Please provide further clarifications on the position of the appointed EA, whether there might be a potential conflict of interest in relation to the project and how such conflict could be managed to avoid an impact on the project.
4. The coordinator is encouraged to regularly communicate with the Project Officer and provide update on the project implementation; in particular, in case of issues that may impact foreseen project activities or planning, you should inform the PO well in advance.
5. Regarding your website: **Project website** will need to be regularly updated. Make sure that the project website is constantly updated with communication/dissemination/outreach activities of the network but also with early results of the projects and with any other material that further promotes the project visibility and raises awareness of the objectives and expected impact.
6. **Eligibility of the fellows:** double check with the beneficiaries that the mobility rule is respected for all the DCs recruited and inform the PO in writing accordingly.
7. Ensure that all DCs are receiving their **salaries** according to the amounts and rules defined in the MSCA Work Programme (living allowance, **mobility** and family allowance, correct currency conversion etc). It is strongly encouraged that a breakdown with amounts is provided to the DCs payslips. Any tuition fees related to the PhD enrolment, **visa fees, fee for the resident permit in Ireland**, travel costs, training, language courses or any other similar fees are to be covered by the institutional costs and not to be charged to the DCs. In case of amounts mistakenly charged to the DCs, these must be reimbursed immediately. All fellows should receive the **mobility allowance** as foreseen in the Grant Agreement. All beneficiaries are requested to cross-check with their HR department and ensure proper payment of their DCs according to the allowances foreseen in the Programme. This needs to be confirmed by each beneficiary to the coordinator and then the coordinator to duly confirm back to REA PO by including relevant exchanged confirmation emails with the linked DCs in copy.
8. Beneficiaries must assist DCs with the **administrative procedures for visa issuing** and reimburse them in case of fees paid out of their own pocket.
9. Beneficiaries are strongly encouraged **to support their DCs** and proactively liaise where necessary with the National Contact Points to clarify any issues and avoid any delays related to issuing a visa, national taxation, accommodation etc. You may consult the following link for more info: [Funding & tenders \(europa.eu\)](https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/horizon/guidance/roles-and-functions-of-ethics-advisory-ethics-advisory-boards-in-ec-funded-projects_he_en.pdf).

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/horizon/guidance/roles-and-functions-of-ethics-advisory-ethics-advisory-boards-in-ec-funded-projects_he_en.pdf

10. Beneficiaries are encouraged to further stimulate and support the interaction of the recruited researchers by establishing regular and frequent communication and interaction channels with fellows and support more collaboration among DCs.
11. In case of **re-planning of secondments and/or trainings**, this will have to be checked first internally and then to be duly communicated to the PO (via Formal Notification). Any re-planning to be reported also during the first periodic reporting. In case the consortium decides internally a re-planning of secondments, relevant letters with proper elaboration and justification of the need of change, to be sent to the PO via Formal Notification attaching any relevant supporting documents (planned vs actual and justification). In addition, beneficiaries are responsible to ensure that secondment are properly planned well in advance, in line with each assigned project requirements.
12. Consortium should ensure the proper **acknowledgment of EU funding** and EU emblem for all current and future communication/dissemination/exploitation and training material (see here: [eu-emblem-rules_en.pdf \(europa.eu\)](#)).
13. Beneficiaries are reminded to **keep records** of the implemented recruitment process in case these are requested in a future audit.
14. As general reminder, please note that complementary skills training (e.g., teaching activity as part of the research training) is possible but must NOT jeopardise the research training activities and must be described in Annex 1 of the grant agreement. Therefore, teaching activities are allowed if (1) they do not jeopardize the research training activities, (2) are mentioned in Annex 1, and (3) are not remunerated.

Further recommendations on Continuous Reporting: Continuous Reporting to be regularly updated in the system (relevant guidance can be found under <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/funding/display/ECResearchGMS/Continuous+Reporting>). Concretely:

- a. Publishable summary-tab: Please ensure that the section is regularly updated in line with the guidelines to reflect the current project status; make sure to attach also any file showcasing project related activities as well as the established project website.
- b. Deliverables-tab: in case of delays in submission, please use the comments box and inform the PO accordingly. Respect of the deadlines by all beneficiaries is key to avoid unnecessary delays. Please be reminded to submit all scientific in times before the submission of the periodic report, otherwise we will not be able to assess the implementation of the project. **Please make sure to submit the Career Development Plan for each recruited researcher, signed by the fellow and the responsible PI. Please inform the PO as soon as the CDPs are ready to re-open the deliverable in the portal.**
- c. Milestones-tab: Please continue to keep updated the milestones-tab by indicating the achieved milestones (ticking the respective check-boxes) and provide comments on each milestone. In case of delays in the submission, make sure to insert comments in the comments box and inform the PO accordingly.
- d. Publications-tab: Make sure that, when publications occur, you update the Publications tab with all necessary information and in line with the Open Access requirements under Horizon Europe: provide the DOI, the link to publication and the repository links in the system for all peer-reviewed publications. Make sure that all peer-reviewed publications are in open access and acknowledge the EU funding as defined in Art.17.2 of the Grant Agreement. It is recommended that the DCs are involved as authors or co-authors in the publications produced in the context of the project.
Please also have a look at the Open Research Europe (ORE) platform: [Open Research Europe | Open Access ... | Open Research Europe \(europa.eu\)](#)
- e. Mobility tab (MD): please keep the mobility declarations up to date and ensure that all encoded data are correct. Please also make sure that the last countries of

residence are updated and correct for all recruited DCs, specifically for those that among their past countries of activity, it is also the country of the recruiting beneficiary.

In addition, please confirm in the first technical report that all fellows comply with the mobility rule.

Please ensure that you choose “YES” to the question “Career Development Plan for this researcher is already developed” for all recruited researchers.

As the PhD enrolment is mandatory in MSCA-DN actions, the absence of enrolment could lead to ineligibility of unit costs. Hence, it is required that all fellows are enrolled in a PhD programme in any academic institution of the Consortium members (in at least one EU-MS). Please make sure that the fellows are enrolled and confirm in the technical report. In case the fellow is entitled to receive the family allowance, please make sure to inform the PO to re-open the MD.

It should be reminded that the **family allowance** contributes to researchers with family. As stated under Article 6.2 of the grant agreement, ‘family’ means persons linked to the researcher by marriage (or a relationship with equivalent status to a marriage recognised by the legislation of the country where this relationship was formalised) or own dependent children who are actually being maintained by the researcher.

- f. Dissemination and Communication activities-tab: information to be encoded here on the number of events/actions performed and of the allocated funding regarding dissemination, communication, outreach activities (following what is planned in your DoA and in your updated Dissemination & Communication planning).

Please share the PO presentation with the consortium.

As a kind reminder at the time of your first periodic reporting, the coordinator will have to report also (under the relevant section of the technical periodic report) on how the recommendations coming from the mid-term check meeting, were addressed by the consortium.

Please ensure that the other members of your consortium are informed of this letter.

Yours sincerely,

REA Project Officer
Daniela Mauri