

Multilateral Lead Agency Agreement (MLA)

The research funding agencies signatories of this Agreement,
hereafter referred to as “the Parties”
agree as follows:

Preamble

After several years of mostly bilateral Lead Agency relations, the research funding agencies that are Parties to this Agreement recognise the potential complexity generated by the variety and the heterogeneity of the existing agreements and acknowledge the potential for simplification in the submission and evaluation of transnational applications under a multilateral framework for the Lead Agency procedure.

Article I Definitions

a) Pre-determined funding scheme

The Pre-determined funding scheme is an existing funding scheme opened to national or regional proposals and which is opened by a Party for the application of the Multilateral Lead Agency (MLA) procedure under this Agreement. Such a funding scheme should be as thematically open as possible to allow for bottom-up collaboration in research aimed at gaining new knowledge without any direct commercial use.

b) MLA Proposal

An MLA Proposal is an application for an integrated research project submitted under the MLA procedure, jointly prepared by Co-applicants falling under the coverage of at least two different Parties. It has a joint research question and a joint research plan, and the project parts are complementary and interdependent (integrated research project). Involved Parties are research funding agencies signatories of this Agreement, under whose coverage are applicants of the pre-determined funding scheme.

c) Approved Project

An Approved Project is an MLA Proposal that has been accepted for funding by all involved Parties.

d) Co-applicant

A Co-applicant is an applicant involved in an MLA Proposal and eligible for funding within the Pre-determined funding scheme at their respective Party. The Co-applicants contribute significantly and complementarily to the foreseen project.

e) Coordinating applicant and Corresponding applicant

The Co-applicants determine the Coordinating applicant. The Coordinating applicant is the Co-applicant who has an organising and coordinating role within the group of Co-applicants. The Coordinating applicant submits the MLA Proposal to the funding scheme of their respective Party, which acts as the Lead Agency. Therefore, the choice of the Coordinating applicant determines the Lead Agency.

The Corresponding applicant is the contact point for the Party. If several Co-applicants fall under the coverage of an agency involved in the MLA Proposal, they determine one Corresponding applicant.

f) Lead Agency

The Lead Agency is the Party which is responsible for the evaluation of an MLA Proposal.

g) Partner Agency

A Partner Agency is a Party, other than the Lead Agency, with one or more Co-applicants involved in the MLA Proposal.

h) Administrating Agency

The Administrating Agency is the Party in charge of coordinating the overall MLA collaboration between all Parties with regard to this Agreement and its implementation.

i) MLA Threshold

The MLA Threshold is a figure set in % defining a maximum, top-ranked share of all proposals that compete with each other in a Pre-determined funding scheme at the Lead Agency. It is agreed upon by all Parties and specified in the Implementation Guidelines.

Article II **Multilateral framework for the Lead Agency procedure**

a) Multilateral Lead Agency Framework

The present Agreement defines an international and multilateral collaboration framework composed of research funding agencies in which the Lead Agency procedure will be applied in a

harmonised way in all participating countries or regions, namely the Multilateral Lead Agency (MLA) framework.

b) General aim

The Lead Agency procedure should make the submission of cross-border research project proposals easier, simplify their administration, decrease the workload due to peer review procedures and improve the collaboration between research funding agencies. It aims at promoting international collaboration among researchers and, finally, adding value to the performed research. The MLA approach facilitates the procedures for researchers to work with the partners they deem most appropriate for their research, also beyond bilateral collaboration.

c) Principles

In the MLA framework, the Parties are committed to accepting and handling bi- or multilateral proposals submitted by several Co-applicants, either as a Lead Agency or as a Partner Agency. Except for documented technical or procedural incompatibilities, each Party recognises the other Parties as potential partners in the application of the Lead Agency procedure, either as a Lead Agency or as a Partner Agency.

d) Description of the Lead Agency procedure

The MLA Proposals are submitted to a Pre-determined funding scheme of the Lead Agency. The Lead Agency evaluates these MLA Proposals in competition with other proposals submitted to this Pre-determined funding scheme. The Lead Agency treats them in the same manner, using the same standards and criteria of that scheme.

Among the proposals selected for funding by the Lead Agency, only MLA Proposals ranked within the MLA Threshold will be recommended for funding by the Lead Agency to the Partner Agencies. Upon mutual agreement between the Lead Agency and Partner Agencies, proposals outside of the MLA Threshold may be funded.

The Partner Agencies recognise the result of the Lead Agency's evaluation procedure and typically confirm the funding recommendation for their respective parts of the selected MLA Proposals.

Each Party funds the parts of the Approved projects falling under its coverage.

All involved Parties apply their procedure and rules in conformity with their respective applicable national and own regulations.

Article III **Collaboration framework**

The Parties work in the interest of the scientific communities and in accordance with their respective legislations.

The Parties shall facilitate, for the purposes of the collaboration framework, joint activities such as the exchange of staff and of relevant information on their evaluation process.

In order to sustain the conditions necessary for the implementation of the MLA procedure, the Parties shall, within this collaboration framework, conduct the following activities:

- i. Adopt by consensus and maintain the MLA Implementation Guidelines attached to this Agreement.
- ii. Monitor and periodically publish the progress of the Lead Agency procedure and make any necessary adjustments to the implementation.
- iii. Participate actively in the management of the activities stipulated in this Agreement and the further development of the MLA procedure.
- iv. Communicate funding possibilities: Define and communicate annually a mutual calendar indicating the Parties funding schemes (and deadlines) open to submission of MLA Proposals.

The Parties are expected to cover their own costs linked to these tasks.

Article IV **Implementation of the Multilateral Lead Agency procedure**

a) Fostering collaboration under the auspices of every agencies' rules

The Parties act in a flexible manner with regard to the implementation of this Agreement. While respecting their respective regulations, the Parties are encouraged to be flexible in their application and evaluation procedures as well as the timelines for these procedures in such a way as to ensure mutual compatibility between the organisations' processes.

When required, Lead and Partner Agencies contact each other to resolve issues in an open, constructive and pragmatic manner that bears in mind the best interests of the involved scientific communities.

b) Evaluation of the MLA Proposals

The evaluation of the MLA Proposals is performed by the Lead Agency and is based on peer review. It is conducted in accordance with the agreed Implementation Guidelines, and with the Lead Agency evaluation procedures applicable to the Pre-determined funding scheme.

In a spirit of building trust and guaranteeing transparency and fairness in the assessment of MLA Proposals, the Parties are engaged in a process of mutual exchange of information and practice with respect to how they conduct their peer review process. The Parties commit to mutually informing each other in a timely manner of any changes that would have an impact on the consistent application of the MLA procedures.

c) Funding recommendation and mutual recognition of the evaluation results

Based on the results of the evaluation process, the Lead Agency makes a funding recommendation to the Partner Agencies. It grants access to the necessary documentation of the evaluation, including in particular the names of the evaluators, their reviews and conclusions for the Partner Agencies to document and take their own decision.

The Partner Agencies acknowledge the results of the Lead Agency's evaluation and that the MLA Proposals submitted to the Lead Agency have been treated in a fair manner that is consistent with the Implementation Guidelines. They also acknowledge that this recognition is typically sufficient

to enact the Lead Agency's funding recommendation for the Co-applicants under their coverage. Deviations from the Lead Agency's recommendation should occur only in exceptional and rare cases and need to be justified thoroughly.

d) Funding decision

The Partner Agencies provide the necessary financial resources to be able to fund in principle all recommended MLA Proposals with Co-applicants under their coverage. They use the results of the evaluation process and the recommendation of the Lead Agency as a basis for the internal processes necessary to reach their decision.

An MLA Proposal will only be accepted for funding, if all involved Parties decide to fund their respective part.

e) Funding and reporting

For MLA Proposals that receive a positive decision, each Party releases the funding to the respective Co-applicant(s) under their coverage according to their procedures and regulations. The Co-applicants must comply with the relevant reporting and monitoring procedures of their respective funding agency.

Article V **Participating research funding organisations**

a) MLA participation criteria for research funding organisations

The MLA procedure is open to research funding organisations that are members of Science Europe which meet the following criteria:

- i. They agree to implement the Lead Agency procedure according to the rules described in this Agreement and in its Implementation Guidelines.
- ii. They have an appropriate Pre-determined funding scheme for MLA Proposals submitted under the multilateral Lead Agency procedure.
- iii. They adhere to international principles on peer review, for example as set out in the 2018 Statement of Principles on Peer Review of the Global Research Council.¹
- iv. They have signed or strive to adhere to the principles of the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment.²
- v. They select or elect members of evaluation bodies of research proposals based on scientific merit.

¹ http://www.globalresearchcouncil.org/fileadmin/documents/GRC_Publications/Statement_of_Principles_on_Peer-Merit_Review_2018.pdf [retrieved on 12 November 2019]

² <https://sfдора.org/read> [version of May 2013, retrieved on 12 November 2019]

b) Other organisations

Research funding organisations which are not members of Science Europe may be accepted as Parties of this Agreement, provided that they fulfil the Science Europe membership criteria and the criteria i. to v. listed in litt. a of this Article.

c) Request to become a Party to the Agreement

Any research funding organisation may request to become a Party to the present Agreement. The Implementation Guidelines regulate the procedure for making such a request.

Parties to the present Agreement shall be part of one of the following two categories of Parties:

- i. Parties which have signed the present Agreement, and which implement the MLA procedure in accordance with this Agreement and the Implementation Guidelines towards all other Parties to the Agreement according to the principles in Article II litt. c of this Agreement.
- ii. Parties which have signed the present Agreement, and which implement the MLA procedure in accordance with this Agreement and the Implementation Guidelines towards some but not all of the other Parties to the Agreement. Not later than five years after the start of the implementation of the MLA procedure, these Parties shall apply the MLA procedure towards all other Parties to the Agreement, with the exception of those Parties in case of which documented technical or procedural incompatibilities exist.

**Article VI Administration of the MLA Agreement:
decision-making and tasks of the Parties**

The administration and implementation of this Agreement is the responsibility of all Parties. They appoint an Administrating Agency on a rotating basis, which shall hold office for a duration of one calendar year.

a) Decision-making

The Parties shall strive for consensus on matters regarding the Agreement. In case this is not reached, the Parties shall each have one vote and at least half of the participating organisations plus one must be represented. Except where otherwise provided in this Agreement, decisions shall be taken by a simple majority.

b) Tasks

The duly authorised representatives nominated by the Parties shall, subject to the provisions of this Agreement:

By unanimous decision:

- i. Define its detailed procedures
- ii. Accept new Parties (Article V, litt. c)

- iii. Modify the Implementation Guidelines (Article VII, litt. b)
- iv. Specify the MLA Threshold according to the rules described in the Implementation Guidelines
- v. Approve the application of the multilateral Lead Agency procedure on Pre-determined funding schemes of the Parties or their important modifications that may influence the application of the MLA procedure.

By two-third majority:

- vi. Exclude a Party (Article IX)

By simple majority:

- vii. Design and communicate the necessary information documents for the implementation of the MLA procedure.

c) Tasks of the Administrating Agency

The Administrating Agency shall:

- Be the contact point for the Parties.
- Organise, prepare and chair the meetings of the duly authorised representatives of the Parties.
- Offer mediation in the event of a dispute between two or more Parties in the implementation of the MLA procedure.

The Administrating Agency is supported in its tasks by the outgoing and the incoming Administrating Agencies.

Article VII **Amendments**

a) Amendment of the Agreement

The duly authorised representatives of the Parties may recommend amendments to this Agreement. Any Party that wishes to propose an amendment shall notify the Administrating Agency. The Administrating Agency shall inform all Parties of any amendment proposal and initiate a consultation process.

Any amendment of this Agreement shall require approval in writing by all Parties. Any approved amendment shall come into force on a date to be decided by the duly authorised representatives of the Parties.

b) Amendment of the Implementation Guidelines

The duly authorised representatives of the Parties may amend the Implementation Guidelines annexed to this Agreement by unanimous decision, provided that such amendment does not conflict with the Agreement. Any such amendment shall come into force on a date to be decided by the duly authorised representatives of the Parties.

Article VIII **Disputes**

The Parties commit to informing any other Party timely on any difficulties arising.

Any dispute between two or more Parties concerning the interpretation or application of this Agreement shall be settled amicably by consultation between the Parties.

Article IX **Non-fulfilment of Obligations**

If a Party fails to fulfil its obligations under this Agreement, it shall cease to be recognised as a participating organisation on a decision approved by a two-thirds majority of the Parties, which also decide on the date of the exclusion.

In this case, other Parties involved in concerned MLA Proposals may require that the submission and evaluation processes, as well as funding activities already initiated by the excluded party under this Agreement, are not affected.

Article X **Termination**

a) Notification

Any Party may give notice in writing to the Administrative Agency of withdrawal from the MLA Agreement. The notice must be given at least six months in advance of the desired withdrawal date.

b) Effect of the termination

All rights and obligations of the withdrawing organisation fully remain in force until the withdrawal takes effect. Submission and evaluation processes, and funding activities already initiated under this Agreement shall not be affected by a termination.

Article XI **Dissolution**

The MLA Agreement may be dissolved at any time by agreement between all Parties. In the case of dissolution, the Parties decide on a date. Ongoing submission and evaluation processes, and funding activities already initiated under this Agreement shall not be affected by the dissolution.

Article XII **Laws and Regulations**

It is the responsibility of each Party to ensure that its actions taken in the execution of this Agreement comply with all applicable national, international or local laws or regulations, especially all laws and regulations on data protection.

Article XIII **Signature and ratification**

This Agreement and the annexed Implementation Guidelines, which are an integral part thereof, shall be open for signature from 12.11.2019 until 31.12.2020 to any of the research funding organisation participating in its initial negotiation and draft, which satisfies the conditions laid down in Article V, litt. a. These organisations establish a roadmap that shows the phase-in for each organisation.

After this time, the research funding organisations may request to sign the Agreement according to the accession procedure laid down in Article V, litt. c, and in the Implementation Guidelines.

Article XIV **Entry into force**

This Agreement and the annexed Implementation Guidelines, which are an integral part thereof, shall enter in force as soon as three agencies have ratified it. These agencies may jointly decide to fix a later date instead, but not later than one year after the ratification by the third agency