

One-off call for projects « Post AgreenSkills Fund » to support international career paths of young researchers

G Aumont, coordinator, AgreenSkills, November 2019

Background

The AgreenSkills programme (2012-2019) was an international mobility programme co-funded by the European Commission in the frame of the COFUND - FP7 People Programme (AgreenSkills and AgreenSkills+). It was coordinated by the French National Institute for Agricultural Research (INRA, becoming INRAE in 2020). Please consult www.agreenskills.eu for further information. The objective was to support the career paths of young researchers world wide by supporting international mobility, in a spirit of disciplinary and thematic openness, in compliance with the Excellence pillar of the European framework programmes. All scientific approaches and topics were supported, both fundamental and applied, provided that the projects demonstrated scientific excellence and were designed and carried out by the fellows.

The programme also aimed to contribute to improving INRA's attractiveness and international visibility by supporting laboratories of high scientific quality, providing additional salaries to make INRA post-doctoral positions attractive and competitive, or facilitating long-term stay abroad by providing mission fees up to the required level. The programme involved annual seminars, with presentations by research fellows, lectures by high level senior scientists and training on the most up-to-date research practices. (<https://www.agreenskills.eu/Annual-Meetings-Training>). Please refer to the web site to get an overview of the spirit of the programme.

AgreenSkills' was very positively reviewed in terms of scientific results, human resources and funding by the Research Executive Agency in July 2019.

Convinced of the interest of such a programme, the INRA General Direction and the AgreenSkills' coordinators have decided to allocate financial resources, called the "Post AgreenSkills Fund" (PAF), to co-fund projects of young INRAE researchers along the same principles as AgreenSkills programmes (openness, international mobility, excellence).

As this funding is committed from INRAE's own resources, the co-funding process and the spending modalities of expenses will be simpler, wider, and more flexible than in the previous programmes, but also more limited. That is why a single "One-off call", will be launched to support a limited number of projects from 2020 to June 2022, making full use of available resources.

As the call is based on INRAE's own resources, the applicant must be in contact with an INRAE research group to prepare an application.

Types of projects and funding principles

Research projects for and by young researchers

This new INRAE action will support research projects led by and for young researchers who wish to become or who have recently become independent researchers¹ (or principle investigator, PI). Its goal is to support these young researchers in the coordination and participation of excellence projects and the development of their international network. International mobility is therefore be a mandatory dimension of the projects without necessarily being the central core; the PAF fund can cover all types of expenses.

A personal commitment will be required in the application from researchers who wish to make an international mobility.

Excellence and originality

All types of research within the remit of INRAE, fundamental, upstream, technological, finalised, etc. can be considered, with no limits on topics nor disciplines. The career development of young researchers is determined by their ability to conduct original and exploratory research. Originality of the approaches and themes and the innovation in the methodologies envisaged are thus expected, as well as the ability to analyse the expected impact and assess potential risks. The scientific potential of the young researchers and the quality and relevance of the host lab conditions are also among the main requirements.

The evaluation of projects at an international level is based on the impact of research activities. Thus, projects will be expected to contribute to highly visible deliverables (publications, patents, innovation, expertise, training, etc.) and to address major research issues. Particular attention will be paid to the ethical reflection of project leaders, like for European projects. Self-assessment of expected impacts and ethical issues will therefore be considered in the evaluation.

Data

¹ The level of the research career is based on the number of years of research experience rather than age: it is assumed that the independent researcher has 10 years of research activity after his or her doctorate ("R2") he or she has recently become a principal investigator ("R3").

<https://euraxess.ec.europa.eu/europe/career-development/training-researchers/research-profiles-descriptors>

B. Scholz et al., 2009. Research Careers in Europe Landscape and Horizons, Esfr.org.

Projects must include a Data Management Plan (DMP) that will be evaluated, according to a form provided by DipSO (e-Infrastructure project). This DMP might be adapted after selection with the support of DipSO.

Parties interest and co-funding

The interest and agreement of the hosting lab(s) and of the research division(s) should be expressed in the application form.

In line with the spirit of the AgreeSkills projects, it is expected that the projects should be co-financed by contributions from laboratories involved in the project, based on identified available or expected resources.

Implementation modalities and practical considerations

The coordinator of this fund is the coordinator of the AgreeSkills programme, G Aumont.

The total amount of the funding in the Post AgreeSkills Fund is 1.6 million €, which makes it possible to co-fund 3 to 6 projects, i.e. between 250 k€ and 500 k€ of PAF subvention per project. Only one call is planned.

The selected projects are internal INRAE projects, but will not exclude contributions from other organisations and of course contributions from organisations abroad (hosting, co-funding, eventual hosting agreement at INRAE, etc.). These external contributions must be formalized through bilateral agreements (or at least a non-binding but clear letter of intent) at the time of submission.

Projects must be approved by the relevant INRAE Research Division(s) to avoid any orientation that may conflict with INRAE's strategy.

Eligibility

1. The projects must concern INRAE teams that will be able to operate the budgets benefiting from the grant.
2. Projects must be submitted by researchers working in a team recognized by INRAE. It is strongly recommended that these researchers, acting here as project leaders, carry out an international mobility as described below in point 3. However, since projects may go beyond the scope of mobility (in terms of duration, actions performed, covered costs, etc.) and be very heavy, these projects may be led by researchers with research experience exceeding the eligibility criteria defined by AgSk for international mobility.
3. Projects must include at least one international mobility according to the criteria of AgSk projects², i.e. incoming mobility of between 12 and 36 months, and/or outgoing mobility of between 6 and 24 months (possible breaks), international mobility being considered as a stay in a country where the researcher has not stayed more than 12 months in the last 3 years. The eligibility criteria for young researchers involved in international mobility will be those of the AgreeSkills+ programmes: level R2 to R3 (recently) and having less than 10 years after the PhD³. The eligibility of these researchers can be confirmed if necessary with the coordinator by sending a sufficiently detailed CV to programme-management@agreenskills.eu. Several international mobilities can be supported per project.
4. Projects may involve other post-doctoral fellows, engineers and doctoral candidates as well as permanent researchers, without any restriction on the duration of research experience or status. Salaries for fixed-term contracts can be funded or co-funded by the PAF.
5. These permanent or non-permanent researchers must be identified in the application. Fixed-term contracts staff must be recruited by INRAE according to the rules in force at INRAE and the AgSk programme⁴ regulation for young researchers carrying out international mobility.

Duration, subvention and funding

The origin of the PAF makes it possible to work with great flexibility in terms of management. The only supporting documents requested will be the employment contracts of doctoral students and young non-permanent researchers funded by the PAF. Proof of expenditure will not be required (except in the case of transfer under agreement to third parties, which should be avoided to the extent possible).

ALL types of expenditure are eligible in whole or in part (salaries of non-permanent staff of all kinds, operational costs, equipment, travel expenses of invited foreign researchers and researchers going to work abroad, international seminars, etc.) with the obvious exclusion of expenditure already covered by the public research institutions (salaries of permanent researchers and associated overheads, depreciation costs) since these are non-contractual own resources. In accordance with the spirit of the AgreeSkills projects, projects should be cofunded by contributions from beneficiary laboratories with identified (or expected) resources (. On the other hand, unlike AgreeSkills projects, ALL co-financing resources are eligible (private, public (at INRAE, SE, "crédit d'accueil", metaprogramme, etc., national, European,...) to cover ALL types of eligible expenditure (salaries of non-permanent staff of any kind, operational costs, equipment) excluding those already covered by INRAE or by other higher education and research institutions (i. e. salaries of permanent researchers and associated overheads, depreciation costs).

² https://www.agreenskills.eu/Media/files/AgSk-Guide-for-Applicants_v4_August2016_final-with-annexes2

³ The level of the research career is based on the number of years of research experience rather than age: it is assumed that the independent researcher has 10 years of research activity after his or her doctorate ("R2") he or she has recently become a principal investigator ("R3").

<https://euraxess.ec.europa.eu/europe/career-development/training-researchers/research-profiles-descriptors>

B. Scholz et al., 2009. Research Careers in Europe Landscape and Horizons, Esfr.org.

⁴ Except in very exceptional cases for fixed-term contracts recruited by other organizations. However, in this case, they will have to quickly sign a fund transfert agreement and provide at the end of the project, accounting justification, which could lead to delays that are incompatible with the optimal use of resources.

The project duration is limited to 3 years. For financial engineering reasons the use of grants will not exceed 2 years, the gap being funded by other contributors. This reinforces the interest of considering co-funding.

The financial eligibility conditions require that the projects applications include both a synthetic financing plan for feasibility assessment (by the experts) and a precise financing plan (for the INRAE financial department).

The salaries of non-permanent personnel that are funded or co-funded by the PAF must be included in the precise financing plan. The salaries of young researchers that will perform an international mobility have to follow the rules defined by Technical Note No. 2015-06⁵, and described on the AgSk website⁶. Outgoing mobility allowances (long-term mission > 2 months) have to be compliant with the principles defined by the AgSk programme (between 1700 € and 3000 € per month depending on the countries concerned and according to the rules described in the note No. 2015-06⁷). These costs might be covered by PAF but it is highly recommended to find funding from the INRAE UMARI as some resources will be available in the 2020 budget.

Reviewing and selection

It is recommended that young researchers wishing to apply discuss with their scientific supervisor before submitting. Projects will be evaluated by independent external international experts (*Cf.* evaluation process of AgreeSkills programme), under the supervision of the PAF coordinator, in agreement and total transparency with the INRAE Deputy Director General for Scientific Affairs (DGDS). These experts will be identified in cooperation with the INRAE Research Divisions. A summary opinion will be given to the applicant via the Research Division, by a steering committee (composed of coordinator, members of the AgSk Scientific committee, DGDS). An interview with the applicant researcher(s) might be considered at the request of the members of the steering committee.

Application documents

To be filled in by the applicant (project leader):

- Research project template;
- CV Template for young researchers carrying out international mobility (*1 CV template per researcher and a brief CV template for the applicant-project leader should he (she) does not plan to make an international mobility*);
- DMP template;
- Ethic and impact templates;

To be filled in by the hosting lab referent person and the Research Division referent person

- Interview report and opinion templates;

To be filled in by the head of the project leader's research unit who will manage the grant

- Detailed funding plan for budget allocation and monitoring

Agenda

The announcement of the call is made by the head(s) of Research Division (CDs) to the heads of INRAE Research Units. Projects must be submitted by the **June 19th 2020, 24:00 CET** to the email: programme-management@agreenskills.eu in a zipped file including all the documents. Applicants will receive an acknowledgement of receipt and eligibility by email.

The result of the evaluation will be provided by email to the applicants with copies to the relevant head(s) of the Research Division (identified in the application). Appeal could be made by the project leader to the PAF coordinator within 2 weeks of receipt of the email.

In case of success, the Financial Department will directly allocate subventions to the INRAE units' budgets. This payment might be made in instalments from April 2020, January 2021, or even in January 2022, in accordance with the implementation and financing plan included in the application. As these are non-contractual own resources, it will be possible to update the implementation funding plan. In exceptional cases, funding plans could be updated but this should be avoided to the extent possible to avoid additional administrative burden. It is therefore important to provide a quite precise plan of expenditure implementation at the submission step.

A simple midterm monitoring of the implementation of the projects will be carried out in April 2021 through a deliverable indicating the level of credit consumption and the achievement of the milestones mentioned in the application. These deliverables should be signed by the involved Head(s) of units and sent to the coordinator of this call, with copies to the head(s) of the Research Division.

The final report will consist of a scientific report with a list of already obtained or expected deliverables and, if possible, productions (articles, reports, other publications) deposited in an Open Archive to assess productions if the articles have not yet been published. Financial receipts will not be required, except for employment contracts for young researchers carrying out an international mobility. The scientific report will be transmitted to the Research Division and the DGDS via the PAF coordinator.

⁵ For hosting lab use : « Note 2012-74 modulée par la résolution adoptée par le Conseil d'administration de l'INRA le 23 octobre 2012 et mise en œuvre par la note technique N°2015-06 du 29/09/2015 intitulée Modalités de gestion financière des programmes AgreeSkills et AgreeSkills + »

⁶ https://www.agreenskills.eu/Media/files/AgSk-Guide-for-Applicants_v4_August2016_final-with-annexes2

⁷ Capped at 40% of the daily allowances set by the Chancellery (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), https://www.economie.gouv.fr/dgfip/mission_taux_chancellerie/frais