MSCA Success Stories from Organisations in Widening Countries

Host organisation: University of Malta (UM)
Country: Malta
Organisation role: Beneficiary/ WP leader/ Task leader
Project Acronym: NL4XAI
Project start and end date: October 2019 – October 2023
Type of MSC action, H2020: ITN

Your story:

Project objectives and research field:
The project falls within the field of Explainable Artificial Intelligence (XAI). The objective is to train early-stage researchers to develop the next generation of explainable AI models, with a focus on the use of Natural Language to provide users with explanations.

Tell us why the topic is important and/ or how it brings to advancement in your research field:
Explainability is one of the most important frontiers facing AI systems today. As AI becomes increasingly pervasive in everyday life, it also becomes crucial for users to understand how such systems make decisions and produce outputs. The most natural medium for conveying such explanations is language. This is the focus of NL4XAI. The specific ESR project led by UM focuses on multimodal vision-language systems, and aims to develop a thorough understanding of the way deep neural models learn the grounding of linguistic expressions in perceptual (visual) data. This has several practical applications, including facilitating the integration of information from multiple modalities in autonomous systems. But it also has important theoretical implications, insofar as bridging the gap between symbolic and perceptual representations is a long-standing, elusive goal for AI. In seeking to make the process of perceptual grounding more robust, we also hope to make multimodal models more transparent and explainable.
What are the benefits of participating in an MSC action?
This MSC ITN brought together some of the most prominent researchers in the field and provided the resources to identify and train a significant number of promising early-stage researchers. From this perspective, it has clear benefits both to senior researchers, among whom collaboration is enhanced, and to individuals starting out on their career.
The NL4XAI project is still in its initial stages, but its implications for society could be significant, given that it seeks to enhance access and understanding to complex intelligent systems for users.

Did you encounter any challenges during application/implementation and did you get any help?
I will focus on application, as the project is in its early stages. I received a lot of excellent support from the UM Research Support services, who were instrumental in pointing out issues with financing, among other things, and helping in their resolution. The lead beneficiary in the project, the University of Santiago de Compostela, was also very organised and has so far led the process impeccably.
Some challenges did arise during the first stages of implementation and these are mainly home-grown.
First, UM has a top-heavy administrative structure: interviews cannot be done without the presence of someone from the top tier of university management, and organising interviews takes a significant amount of time. I wish to emphasise that HR and the responsible pro-Rector were extremely helpful and did their best to expedite the process. The problem lies with the recruitment policy, not with them.
A second, ongoing challenge is space. The Institute at which I work is currently housed in sub-standard office space bordering a building site. As a result, the MSC fellow hired on the project has to deal with significant noise pollution during working hours, not the best situation for someone hired on a prestigious grant. In short, UM needs to commit itself to supplying adequate working space for researchers.

Would you recommend others to apply? What useful advice/tips can you give them?
I would certainly recommend others to apply for MSC ITN funding. My main recommendations to others would be:
1. Ensure that the partners in your consortium are organisations or individuals you have either worked with before or whose work is known to you. An important reason for the cohesiveness of our proposal and subsequent workflow was the fact that we had practically all worked together in some capacity in the past.
2. Build collaboration into the proposal. NL4XAI involves 11 ESRs, but all of them are required to work across sites, with co-supervision and secondments, as well as ample opportunities for networking.
What strategies did your organisation use to attract the fellow/s? Are they in line with national strategies supporting the widening EC policy?

The consortium has a Recruitment and Equal Opportunities Committee. One of the project deliverables – finalised before the recruitment was initiated – was a detailed recruitment plan, in line with the widening EC policy. Our organisation advertised the position widely on social media, professional academic mailing lists and EURAXESS, as well as traditional press outlets. Initial checks for eligibility were handled at the consortium level, and the resulting shortlists for each beneficiary were handled according to each institution’s structures. However, we also ensured that interviews for each ESR position included representatives from more than one beneficiary organisation.