



MIA Portugal

Multidisciplinary Institute of Ageing

**MIA-Portugal research
groups in place
(8 in total)**

Deliverable 1.7



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Summary

This deliverable reports on the progress of the MIA-Portugal project regarding the installation of eight research groups at the University of Coimbra.

As outlined in the GA, the MIA-Portugal budget was allocated to directly cover the salaries of seven group leaders along with their teams, which encompassed post-doctoral researchers and technicians. In response to the minimal budget expenditure by the conclusion of 2023, we made the decision to incorporate an additional research team directly recruited under the MIA-Portugal project, thus expanding to a total of eight research groups based in Coimbra.

At the moment, four group leaders have been hired, and three of them have already established their research teams in MIA laboratories. During 2023 we opened a [call](#) to hire the remaining group leaders, however, approximately 50% of the foreign candidates did not submit proof of recognition of their PhD diplomas by a Portuguese University, as required by Portuguese law and the text call. This led to the exclusion of those candidates. To ensure a fair and equitable selection process, the University of Coimbra Rector ordered the cancellation of the competition and the re-opening of a new competition (Q3 2023) with a clearer call text that had sufficient flexibility to avoid exclusion of candidates on the grounds of their international PhDs. Four candidates were then selected, and they are currently in the process of signing contracts and hiring the respective research teams.

According to the Grant Agreement, the full MIA team should have been in place on M30 (June 2022), but limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the necessity to refurbish laboratories in a historic building of the University of Coimbra, along with the bureaucratic delays in the hiring process, made it impossible to hire and install all the group leaders in the proposed timeline.

In this report, we present an updated timeline regarding the recruitment of the remaining group leaders and their research teams as well as a comprehensive overview of the efforts being made to hire top researchers for MIA-Portugal.

Recruitment strategy

Since ageing is a relatively recent scientific field, we have anticipated challenges in recruiting scientists with exceptionally competitive CVs. To overcome these challenges, we have been actively promoting and publicizing these positions at both national and international levels.

For example, the most recent job openings were publicized in Nature Careers, Science, Genome Web and EMBO Young Investigators (Figure 1). In addition, announcements were disseminated through major national newspapers, MIA's social media platforms, and targeted direct emails to approximately 300 researchers working in the field of aging.

nature careers Job Seekers: [Log In](#) or [Create Account](#) [Post a Job](#)

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Multidisciplinary Institute of Ageing is recruiting 3 Group Leaders

Recruiter: University of Coimbra (UC)
Location: Portugal
Salary: Gross monthly wage: 3,717,23 euros
Posted: 27 Mar 2023
Closes: 03 May 2023
Discipline: Health Science
Job Type: Principal Investigator
Employment - Hours: Full time
Duration: Fixed term
Qualification: PhD
Sector: Academia

Scientific areas: Ageing
MIA-Portugal has 3 group leader positions available to strengthen its research program on the biology of ageing. The Institute is strongly supported by international institutions and welcomes applications from both young and senior researchers interested in any topic of ageing research. It provides tenure track positions to help new group leaders to develop long-term research programs in the city of Coimbra-Portugal.

Employment Conditions:

- Funding and human resources to support the start of research activities;
- State-of-the-art research facilities;
- Sophisticated and dense biomedical research ecosystem enrolling over 600 researchers;
- Support for translational and clinical work.
- Excellent prospects of tenure track positions and career development

Qualifications and professional experience required:

- Scientific independence and international recognition;

Similar jobs

- Staff Scientist - Molecular and Cellular**
Baylor College of Medicine (BCM)
- Bioinformatician/Sr. Bioinformatician, Functional Genomics Computation Unit**
Human Technopole
- (Senior or Principal) Investigator, In Vitro Biology**
BeiGene Bio-Island

Figure 1. Announcement of the recruitment of three group leaders for MIA-Portugal in Nature Careers.

Since these applications are complex, the calls remained open for a period of at least 30 working days to allow candidates ample time to prepare and submit their applications.

The selection process consists of two stages: an initial curriculum evaluation followed by interviews. This approach is designed to maximize the likelihood of attracting and selecting the most promising candidates. The criteria employed by the jury for selecting applicants focused on research excellence and the ability to secure competitive funding.

Recognizing the importance of competitive candidates who possess a strong ability to attract funding for the long-term financial sustainability of MIA-Portugal, we have expanded our selection criteria to include applicants from diverse scientific fields. By doing so, we have increased the likelihood of attracting highly qualified researchers. We included the fields of Molecular and Cell Biology, Genetics and Genomics, Bioinformatics, Epidemiology, Personalized and Precision Medicine, Data Science and Statistics. To ensure clarity regarding the candidates' motivation to work on topics related to ageing, candidates must include a career development plan in their applications. Additionally, during the public interview process, they are specifically questioned about their motivations for conducting research in the field of aging.

An attractive installation package for researchers was designed, encompassing various components such as substantial support for initiating research activities, tenure track positions,



access to state-of-the-art research facilities, a thriving biomedical research ecosystem comprising over 600 researchers, support for translational and clinical work, and robust international partnerships.

Table 1. Nationality and gender of the applicants to the calls [IT057-22-11738](#) and [IT057-23-13052](#).

Group Leaders - Call Results IT057-22-11738 2023				
Nationality		Gender		
Portugal	22	Male	21	53,8%
Italy	5	Female	18	46,2%
Mexico	2			
Belgium	2			
Cyprus	1			
Brazil	1			
China	1			
Argentina	1			
India	1			
Germany	1			
Ukraine	1			
England	1			
Total	39			

Group Leaders - Call Results IT057-23-13052 2023				
Nationality		Gender		
Portugal	19	Male	21	52,5%
Italy	7	Female	19	47,5%
India	6			
Brazil	2			
Canada	1			
Venezuela	1			
Austria	1			
Russia	1			
Ukraine	1			
Cyprus	1			
Total	40			



MIA-Portugal Group leaders

Table 2. Group leaders hired and selected till December 2023.

Group Leader	Research field	Previous Job location	Hiring date	Nationality
Nuno Raimundo	Metabolism	University of Göttingen, Germany	March 2021	Portuguese
Ira Milosevic	Neurosciences	University of Göttingen, Germany	March 2021	Croatian
Hugo Fernandes	Drug Screening/Senescence	University of Coimbra, Portugal	April 2023	Portuguese
Alessio Vagnoni	Neurosciences/Ageing	King's College London, UK	June 2023	Italian
Saravana Ramasamy	Blood vessels/Ageing	Imperial College London, UK	Waiting to sign contract	Indian
Luís Ribeiro	Neurosciences	University of Coimbra, Portugal	Waiting to sign contract	Portuguese
Joana Ferreira	Neurosciences	University of Coimbra, Portugal	Waiting to sign contract	Portuguese
Marco Candeias	Genome stability	University of Kyoto, Japan	Waiting to sign contract	Portuguese

Research groups in place

Three Principal Investigators, namely Doctor Nuno Raimundo, Doctor Ira Milosevic, and Doctor Hugo Fernandes and their research groups are in place (8 postdocs and 2 technicians directly hired by MIA-Portugal). These researchers were able to raise around 1.5M€, have published in quality peer-reviewed journals and initiated some scientific collaborations with MIA-Portugal consortium partners.

Nuno Raimundo's team enrolls the following research team members:

- Hired by the MIA-Portugal project:
 - o Pedro Dionísio, post-Doctoral researcher
 - o Carla Lopes, post-Doctoral researcher
 - o Vilma Oliveira, post-doctoral researcher
 - o Neuza Domingues, post-doctoral researcher
 - o Joana Filipa Mariano Pires, lab technician
- Other:
 - o Patrícia Coelho, PhD student (FCT contract)

Ira Milosevic's team enrolls the following members:

- Hired by the MIA-Portugal project:
 - o Célia Aveleira, post-doctoral researcher
 - o Ivan Salazar, post-doctoral researcher



- Ana Rita Gaspar, lab technician
- Other:
 - Roberto Dias, post-doctoral researcher (FCT contract)
 - Ana Caulino, PhD student (FCT contract)
 - Archana Raghunathan, PhD student (La Caixa fellowship)
 - Ricardo Casqueiro, PhD student (FCT contract)
 - Filipa Silva, PhD student (FCT contract)

Hugo Fernandes signed his contract in April 2023 and is currently installed in provisional laboratories at UC-Biotech, Biocant Park, Cantanhede.

Hugo Fernandes's team enrolls the following members:

- Hired by the MIA-Portugal project:
 - Cristina Blanco, post-doctoral researcher
 - Cláudia Deus, post-doctoral researcher

Hugo is in the process of recruiting one laboratory technician for his group.

Research groups being installed

Alessio Vagnoni signed his contract in June 2023 and is presently in the process of assembling his research team and setting up his Drosophila laboratory in Coimbra. The anticipated start date for the post-doctoral researchers and technician is Q3 2024. The delay in his setup was attributed to the renovation of the laboratories to accommodate a Drosophila facility, which is crucial for Alessio's research.

Luís Ribeiro, Joana Ferreira, Marco Candeias, and Saravana Ramasamy are presently in the process of recruiting their respective research teams and establishing their laboratories. It is expected that the research teams will be in place by Q3 2024.

Justification of deviations

According to the Grant Agreement, the research team should have been in place in June 2022 (M30). The delays in the recruitment of the Principal Investigators are mainly due to:

- COVID-19 - The University of Coimbra experienced significant disruptions to its regular operations and laboratory work due to the series of lockdowns and circulation restrictions imposed by the Portuguese government in 2020 and 2021. The hiring process for researchers was significantly affected by the consecutive travel restrictions imposed by the government, which hindered and delayed the usual procedures of scouting and thorough evaluation required for selecting the most suitable candidates.



- Delay in the construction of the new building and in the refurbishment of temporary laboratories. Since the building will not be ready before 2025, temporary laboratories had to be prepared to install the MIA-Portugal research groups. The need to refurbish these laboratories led to the postponement of the hiring calls. These temporary laboratories are located in a historical building listed as national heritage. Alterations or building works have to be pre-approved by the national authority for the preservation of national heritage ([Direção Nacional do Património Cultural-DNPC](#)). This was a lengthy process that had a negative impact on both the refurbishment of the MIA-Portugal temporary laboratories and the start of the research activities.
- Bureaucratic delay in the recruitment process - In 2023, a call for group leader positions was launched, but around 50% of foreign candidates were disqualified for not providing proof of validation their PhD diplomas by a Portuguese University, as required by law. To ensure fairness, the competition was cancelled by the University of Coimbra's Rector, who ordered a new competition with clearer guidelines and flexibility regarding international PhDs. Four candidates were subsequently selected and are now finalizing contracts and assembling their research teams.

Human resources risk analysis and contingency measures

Throughout the recruitment process (group leaders and post-doctoral researchers), the following risks affected and will still affect the MIA-Portugal operation:

- **University bureaucracy effects on the recruitment process** – The recruitment of Group Leaders was affected by university bureaucracy in two main ways, namely heavy paperwork delayed the opening of the calls, and the requirement of recognition of the PhD of foreign candidates by a Portuguese University lead to the exclusion of some candidates. The former affected all calls opened and the latter affected the last call significantly. Members of the Jury protested about these legal issues, and one of the calls was cancelled by the Rector. The MIA-Portugal director approached the University Rectorate to streamline future processes, reducing bureaucracy and eliminate unnecessary paperwork.
- **Insufficient number of qualified candidates applying for the positions** – Despite the difficulties mentioned above, the calls were attractive and candidates with competitive CVs were identified. Attracting highly qualified researchers to work in Portugal, particularly in the centre region of the country, is challenging. Our approach to overcoming difficulties was to launch extensive international advertising campaigns to promote the available positions. However, this risk will be high for the recruitment of



post-doctoral researchers as young Portuguese PhDs tend to go abroad, and it is difficult to recruit foreign PhDs for fixed-term post-doctoral research positions in Portugal.

- **Competition from other institutions and industries in attracting top talent** – This risk is high. A significant number of researchers are transitioning to the industry sector, where salaries are often more competitive. Lisbon and Porto also remain the most attractive Centres for research in Portugal. To address this, we are offering a compensation package that encompasses: support for equipment acquisition, reagents, and materials. Additionally, we are providing ample professional development opportunities to attract and retain talented researchers.
- **Adaptation difficulties of Group Leaders and Postdocs** – This risk is significant for Portuguese scientists who relocated from abroad to Coimbra, as well as for foreign scientists who made the move to Coimbra. The heavy bureaucracy of the Portuguese scientific system and systemic delays in the acquisition of materials, reagents, and equipment for research in Portugal affect research competitiveness and are major hurdles to a smooth transition and installation of researchers in Coimbra. We are actively working with the University of Coimbra to overcome existing difficulties, and we are hopeful that most issues will be resolved. Solutions include implementing new software to deal with laboratory orders and a supply centre for reagents and consumables for MIA-Portugal, among others.
- **Capacity of MIA-Portugal to improve University processes and paperwork flows** – An important mission of MIA-Portugal is to improve existing processes and paper workflows at the University level, contributing to making it more efficient, research-friendly, and satisfying for the research community as a whole. While MIA-Portugal is highlighting deficiencies and proposing solutions to resolve current difficulties, it is felt that changes are difficult to implement due to the heavy regulatory and the highly structured and hierarchical university system. There is a high risk of researchers experiencing frustration and struggling to adapt. Two risk outcomes are possible, namely Group Leaders and postdocs may be tempted to take the initiative of leaving MIA-Portugal, or contracts cannot be renewed due to Group Leaders disruption of the working environment by constant criticism, stress, and frustration.
- **Alterations of the hiring mechanism for researchers** – We have been utilizing the national mechanism [DL-57](#) to hire researchers, however, this mechanism has proven to be highly bureaucratic and lacks flexibility. For example, the contracts are limited to a duration of three years, with the possibility of annual renewal for up to six years. This poses a significant limitation and may hinder us from fully executing the HR budget. To address this issue, we have proposed to the University to switch from DL-57 to another national approach for hiring post-doctoral researchers, known as "[hiring by invitation](#)".



We will use this mechanism in a similar way to the previous one used for recruiting research teams based on merit and we will adhere to the rights and obligations outlined in Article 32 (AGA) concerning the recruitment and working conditions for researchers, namely:

- Calls will be transparent, international, and widely publicized, including on the EURAXESS Jobs Portal.
 - Candidates will be selected baser on merit by an independent jury.
 - Top candidates will undergo interviews and the highest-ranked candidate will receive an invitation to accept the position.
 - Candidates will have access to an appeal mechanism in case of disagreement with the jury's decision.
 - MIA Ethics Advisory Board will validate the hiring process to prevent any form of discrimination.
 - The salary level and working conditions for researchers will be consistent with those hired using the DL-57 mechanism.
- **Low wages in Portugal** – In Portugal, wages in the public sector are becoming less and less competitive relative to wages offered by the private sector. MIA has already lost the Communication Manager, a secretary Staff member, and a Laboratory technician due to better offers from the private sector. To overcome this difficulty, whenever possible, we are maximizing wages by using the University research hiring scheme. For example, we have opened a call to hire the replacement of the Communication manager through research rather than the technician's hiring scheme. However, this strategy is not available to all technical positions, and the risk of losing technical staff to the private sector is significant.

Disclaimer

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