

A STRONG EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK PROGRAMME FOR RESEARCH & INNOVATION

For a strong Europe in a volatile world

European research and innovation collaboration is crucial to ensuring Europe remains relevant at a volatile global stage. It supports technological independence and strategic autonomy and it ensures influence on global ethical debates around technological developments.

European collaboration on research and innovation provides the key to solving global challenges, and for the engagement between people that ultimately forms the resilience of democratic and collective values in European society.

Therefore, the European Consortium of Innovative Universities (ECIU) calls upon the EU Member States, the European Parliament, and the European Commission to strongly invest in European research and innovation collaboration and to make the European Framework Programme for Research & Innovation a key priority for Europe, ensuring that it is inclusive and open to community-led initiatives.

This paper shares ECIU recommendations to enhance the impact of Europe's Framework programme for research and innovation. The overall recommendation is to work towards a more holistic and long-term approach to funding projects. Complex societal challenges require long-term partnerships, for example, to build European University Alliances, implement challenge-based research projects, and to nurture collaborative ecosystems.

STRENGTHEN THE RESEARCH DIMENSION OF EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY ALLIANCES

The need for holistic and long-term funding is increasingly relevant for European University Alliances. These alliances have great potential to leading the way towards European university collaboration in the future, promoting European values and creating European ecosystems for knowledge sharing.

The need for a holistic, long-term funding instrument

Research, innovation activities with social participation are essential for competitive European University Alliances. Therefore, support for the research and innovation mission of European University Alliances is of crucial importance. ECIU supports the call¹ of European University Alliances to **establish a holistic and long-term funding instrument as a means to deepen transnational cooperation of Alliances across all their missions in a coherent way**. This will enable the European Universities Initiative to go beyond a short-term project approach and deliver on its long-term, innovative and ambitious vision of future-proof European universities, important for a competitive Europe.

The importance of ERA Action 13

Such a funding instrument aligns with **ERA Action 13**, Universities for ERA, and builds synergy with the European Education Area. ECIU relies on Member States to support the development of the European Excellence Initiative for integrated and inclusive networks of Higher Education Institutions, such as the European Universities.

The need for a Task Force on support for European University Alliances

Furthermore, it is important to establish a **task force**, including experts from interested Member States and representatives from European universities, to explore holistic, long-term sustainable support for European Universities Alliances. ECIU pro-actively supports the realisation of support for European University Alliances, by linking policymakers and stakeholders at both the national and European level on this topic.

¹ See the joint call of European University Alliances for holistic and sustainable funding (May 2022): [https://assets-global.website-files.com/551e54eb6a58b73c12c54a18/62f51528b9180f5d2c4d9443_FOR%20EU%20on%20funding%20needs%20incl%20research%20support%20\(1\).pdf](https://assets-global.website-files.com/551e54eb6a58b73c12c54a18/62f51528b9180f5d2c4d9443_FOR%20EU%20on%20funding%20needs%20incl%20research%20support%20(1).pdf)

IMPLEMENT CHALLENGE-BASED RESEARCH

Challenge-Based Research² nicely aligns with the mission-driven approach of Horizon Europe, it is a relevant part of Open Science, and it helps realising a more resilient, inclusive and democratic European society. ECIU University applied the Challenge-Based Research approach in Smart-ER³ and published about it in a paper in 2022.

Make Horizon Europe more open and inclusive

ECIU believes that the drafting of Work Programmes for Horizon Europe could be more inclusive for citizens and society, by adopting an open approach such as that practiced in ECIU Challenge-Based Research. Here, challenges are defined together with society in an open, and responsive way. This would respond to the Commission's priority 'A new push for European democracy', and echo the Conference on the Future of Europe citizen panels made up of 800 citizens. Finally, a structured process where society is closely involved in moving towards the formulation of European Partnerships could be of added value.

The need to be less prescriptive

The very essence of innovation is that it is driven by creative, forward-thinking individuals coming together to realise ideas. Horizon Europe, particularly cluster 2, has become very policy driven. While technically open, the specificity of calls affects attractiveness of the programme to those with much needed high-risk high-gain ideas. Horizon Europe could benefit from a less prescriptive approach while moving towards a bold and risk-taking programme, entrusting investments and the research agenda to innovation ecosystems, including realising more flexible programmes accessible to new parties.

Challenge-Based Research builds on open dialogue to jointly define challenges and supports forming of sustained relationships. This cannot be achieved by top-down agenda driven approaches. It is dangerous for the future of the R&I programme to instrumentalise calls for policy purposes and a desire to ensure proposals are selected that meet these requirements. Public policy programmes do not need to be funded through Horizon Europe.

Through Challenge-Based Research, multi-disciplinary teams work on real-life challenges and co-develop ideas and solutions.

Challenges originate from open structured dialogues with partners from business, education, government, civil society and citizens. The output of co-created research questions makes a tangible contribution to challenges faced in reality. It is a way of directing innovation and the power of research to achieve wider social, policy and economic goals and to contribute to more sustainable and equitable innovation-led growth.

² See also the ECIU paper on Challenge Based Research (May 2022) <https://www.eciu.eu/news/the-future-of-research-is-challenge-based>

³ See also the SMARTER CS platform : <https://www.csinitiative.eu/>

Again: the need for holistic and long-term funding opportunities to ensure local impact of funding

Programme-based (multiple years, multiple projects) funding opportunities support the ecosystems as a productive basis for enhancing impact-driven research. It is important to invest in strong networks of researchers from European universities and regional societal stakeholders that are connected by a desire to innovate and generate new knowledge to enhance the local impact of European funding. The European Structural and Investment Funds, in synergy with Horizon Europe, have the potential to support the development of such networks. Diverse funding opportunities can better continue the knowledge base developed through projects. Currently, research often goes into hibernation once the project funding comes to an end. Programme-based possibilities would contribute to strengthening European Innovation Ecosystems and improving the overall ecosystem for innovation in Europe.

The national and regional dimension of CBR

Furthermore, to bring a Challenge-Based Research approach across Europe into the mainstream, it is important to include the challenge-based approach in the programmes of regional, national and European funders.

This includes:

- Trust in the innovative power of research
- Contributing to societal impact, bottom-up funding opportunities to spur innovation⁴
- Use in Quadruple Helix consortia

STRENGTHENING THE ATTRACTIVENESS OF HORIZON EUROPE

To conclude, ECIU has some concrete recommendations to make Horizon Europe more attractive:

Be careful with lump sum funding

ECIU is in favour of simplification of the management of Framework Programme contracts. Care should be taken with the implementation of lump sum funding so that it does not add to the perceived complexity of grant applications. It should not result in subjective cost judgements detrimental to fair and transparent scoring of implementation nor involve additional financial risk for participants.

⁴ See also ERC study 19-02-2023 “New study reveals how frontier research spurs patented inventions”. More than 40% of ERC-funded projects generated research that was subsequently cited in patents. The results show how curiosity-driven frontier research enables technological development.

On the structure of work programmes

Topics could be more openly structured and the work programmes could be better structured through pre-defined tables (i.e. topic, expected impact, destination, deadlines, funding available) to enable easier extraction of essential information. Newcomers struggle to extract information from the Funding and Tenders portal, the guidelines and work programmes. The same information should be available on the F&T portal, without needing to open the respective Work Programme each time to find required information (i.e. available budget, indicated number of approved proposals).

Support NCPs

National Contact Points (NCPs) can play an enormous role in supporting participants and they should be adequately supported and be given the same channels to receive early notifications/information from Directorates-General and Executive agencies.

The importance of low to mid TRL-funding

To increase the chance of ideas maturing in the valorisation path, there should be an increased focus on early funding. Additional support can be offered for knowledge valorisation of a project's most promising results at an early phase of development. It still is difficult to obtain risk funding for very good ideas at the stage where ideas are just a step beyond the research phase, despite the ambitions of the EIC Pathfinder and Transition. Introducing lower TRL research opportunities, and stimulation of interdisciplinarity in Pillar 2 of Horizon Europe is key for success.

Acknowledge the role of KTO/TTOs

The role of the intermediaries such as knowledge / tech transfer officers (KTO/TTOs) in nurturing complex coalitions of interests needs wider acknowledgement, as this is often an underfunded resource that is crucial to achieving impact. Additionally, investment in training of researchers in supporting multi-sector relationships is important.

Be careful with adding new initiatives

Before any new initiatives are put in place, it is necessary to map what already exists and where complementary measures are needed. This will avoid increasing the complexity of the programme. It is important to reduce the challenges an early-stage researcher faces to assess the different calls and apply for the right instruments. Pillar 1 is straight forward, but Pillars 2 and 3 have many guidelines and calls. Even with support structures as the National Contact Points, it can be difficult to become familiar with the programme.