

Statement of the Finnish Universities: Interim evaluation of Horizon 2020

The Finnish Universities support the continuous efforts of the European Commission to develop and improve the European Research and Innovation Framework Programme. Universities play a major role in European research and innovation as well as education of the future generations, contributing widely to the competitiveness of Europe. In Finland, the universities account for some 39% of the Horizon 2020 funding the country has received so far. Therefore, Universities Finland UNIFI, which acts as a single voice for all the universities in Finland, would like to actively engage in the discussion about the on-going programme and its future directions. Key messages we would like to emphasise are:

- The budget of Horizon 2020 and its successor must be secured
- Excellence must be the most important criterion for awarding H2020 funding
- Funding opportunities must exist for both collaborative and individual research
- Continuation of grant-based funding must be ensured
- Collaborative projects must be funded on the whole scale of TRLs

Priorities and Objectives

The strong focus on **excellence** in Horizon 2020 is the key to the success of the framework programme. From the point of view of universities, evaluation of proposals has to be founded on excellence. Investment in basic research is of fundamental to ensure the continuous flow of new founded knowledge required to develop innovative products and services. The importance of the first pillar “Excellent Science” consisting of ERC, FET, MSCA and Infrastructures cannot be underestimated. **ERC and MSCA** funding schemes in Horizon 2020 are excellent in enhancing the development of European science through a bottom up approach. MSCA together with ERC has formed excellent opportunities for the career development by giving researches opportunities to lead or work with prestigious research teams in Europe, whatever the nationality or scientific domain of the researchers. Both funding schemes should be continued also in the future in their clear and simple way, not jeopardised by any mission orientation, industrial leadership focus or any other added components.

We welcome the Commission developments in **Open Science** which our national efforts complement. Finland aims to become one of the leading countries in openness of science and research. The Finnish Universities contribute actively to the national Open Science and Research Initiative which was established to support reaching this goal. Nevertheless, we want to underline that Open Access is a challenging issue which requires a holistic cultural

Universities Finland UNIFI

Address Pohjoinen Makasiinikatu 7 A 2, FI-00130 HELSINKI, FINLAND

Phone +358-50-522 9421 (Executive Director), +358-50-370 7560 (Senior Adviser), +358-50-5858 565 (Assistant)

E-mail firstname.lastname@unifi.fi or unifi@unifi.fi

www.unifi.fi

change. Full awareness of the issues related to research data management does not exist yet. Also institutional infrastructures for saving and sharing research data are under development. We see the potential of Open Access but do not want to see it hampered by too fast a schedule. Therefore, we urge the Commission to accommodate a transfer period and secure funding for institutional capacity building, training and awareness raising in Open Access issues.

With the Open Access becoming a default setting, the possibility to opt-out at any stage of the project is important, and we stress that the choice should not be allowed to influence the proposal evaluation. We also value that costs related to data management and open access are eligible for H2020 funding. To streamline practices, EC should continue to work with the publishers to ensure that their embargo periods comply with the H2020 Open Access requirements and publications funded by H2020 are made available within the required period.

Relevance and Implementation

Social sciences and humanities (SSH) provide essential insights into human interaction and the working of our societies but currently the role of SSH in H2020 lacks clarity. The integration of SSH, including arts, in Horizon 2020 is only halfway and there is thus a need of more fundamental involvement of SSH across Horizon 2020 and next Framework Programme. More Social Science and Humanities researchers should be involved in the writing of work programmes as well as participating evaluation of the projects, especially in Societal Challenges Pillar. In addition, the expected societal impacts could be described more clearly from the point of view of SSH research that their realisation necessitates. All in all, the transparency of the work programme planning could be improved and structures and practices streamlined across the thematic priorities. Currently, the practices vary from open stakeholder consultations to closed group discussions which puts the different scientific fields in unequal positions.

More bottom-up approach, investigator-driven, collaborative research topics should be open for calls also in pillars II and III of Horizon 2020. The current oversubscription of the FET scheme illustrates the opportunities that collaborative discovery research could bring to pillars II and III of Horizon 2020. A better balance between TRL on one hand and fundamental research on the other hand is needed. The variety and complexity of innovation activities resulting from multidisciplinary research, including SSH disciplines, cannot be fully captured by innovation based solely on TRL levels. The consequence of the bias towards higher TRLs is that a very large fraction of research that is not yet on a technology track is explicitly excluded, regardless of its potential societal or technological relevance or impact.

We welcome all the efforts made by EC to simplify the procedures of applying grants. Not only instruments but also application procedures need to be simplified and administrative burdens reduced. We are satisfied with the steps taken towards **simplification**, but still for example the number of pages required in applications in the final phase is too high.

Oversubscription is a challenge which calls for an immediate response. The negative implications of the **low success rates** must not be underestimated. European University Association (EUA) recently published a report¹ suggesting that the monetary risk involved in drafting unsuccessful proposals might lead to even further disparities between European institutions. When success rates and probability of getting a grant is too low and transaction costs too high, the best researchers may decide to go elsewhere for funding or even work. When the success rates are low and application procedures are heavy, it has led to frustration of the applicants and host institutions, and investments in vain. It is clear that one solution alone cannot solve this but the following options could be considered:

- More focused and less detailed topics descriptions. The call topics should not be too restrictive nor too wide. The call texts are often too broad and the expected impact not realistic for the budget available. We believe that by narrowing the scope of calls, the EC could reduce the number of applicants while still keeping the best parties involved.
- Pre-proposal checks could be piloted since the wide call topics also cause a lot of submissions that in the end fall outside the scope of the call or are too narrowly focused. This would lessen the burden at the submission phase as those would be ruled out beforehand.
- Further development of the two stage submission process to achieve a genuinely lighter 1st stage proposal including proper guidance for the evaluators. Currently, despite the restricted number of pages and content, the first stage proposal requires the development of the full proposal.

During the lifetime of Horizon 2020 the **average size of a consortium** has grown although the minimum requirements have stayed the same. Without restricting the size of the consortia, EC could indicate in the call texts a possible range for the consortium size as it does for the budget as well. If the trend towards mega-sized consortia continues, we fear that it might affect the attractiveness of the programme as the management of projects is only feasible for the large and experienced stakeholders.

The Finnish Universities congratulate the European Commission of the transparency of the **evaluation process**. However, more consistent guidance for the selected evaluators and monitoring of their performance is needed to ensure the quality of the evaluation. The multidisciplinary cross-cutting topics as well as the changing methods and tools for evaluation (e.g. remote evaluation) have complicated evaluator's job. Sometimes this is reflected in the Evaluation Summary Reports which can give inconsistent feedback on the shortcomings of the proposals. In highly competitive calls, when top-scored proposal cannot be funded, rejected applicants need to understand why they have not been selected. Low success rates make good feedback all the more important. As for post-submission feedback, the EC could be more transparent by giving out, after the evaluation and funding decisions, at least the score that constitutes the funding threshold (e.g. 13.5 out of 15). This would help

¹ [EUA Public Funding Observatory 2016](#)

applicants in knowing how close they were from getting funding, rather than keeping them in the dark.

Of the evaluation criteria, **impact** is the most challenging. Unclear expectations for impact continue to cause difficulties for many applicants and evaluators. Impact should not only focus on economic aspects and TRL levels but also consider other areas such as: social impact, environmental factors and citizen engagement. To enable the applicants to address the strategic impacts, the work programmes should provide more precise information on the expected short and long term impacts and the rationale behind them. Reference to the background documents as well as guidelines on how to showcase impact of disciplines such as social sciences and humanities are needed. To guarantee that the impact of the call text is interpreted the way it is intended, it could be tested beforehand with a sample of people who are unfamiliar with work programme topics or the respective Advisory Group members.

Efficiency and EU Added Value

Horizon 2020 has created opportunities for **European collaboration** which the Finnish universities have a strong motivation and desire to continue to benefit from. Cooperation brings added value and international recognition, which cannot be achieved through national funding mechanisms. Europe needs research and innovation ecosystems consisting of numbers of actors, such as universities, RTOs, industry and other cooperation partners, also in the future. The ecosystem must include the whole value chain: basic research as well as the ability to translate research findings into innovations. Without Europe-wide support the development of European research ecosystems ends.

To maximise the results and achieve the goals of ERA, a greater synergy between H2020 and national funding agencies is still needed. A good example of this are **research infrastructures** where development and funding is mainly the responsibility of the Member States. To ensure long-term development and funding base for strategic research infrastructures better coordination and priority setting between EU and Member States is needed. ESFRI provides a good framework for pan-European infrastructure development but further improvements to facilitate the access and collaborative use of research infrastructures should be made. In addition, there is a need to fill the existing gaps as certain fields lack common infrastructures. Also, smaller, focused consortia are needed, as e.g. EATRIS is somewhat unwieldy.

Structure and Synergy with Other EU Programmes

There is a need for greater **synergy** between the different pillars of Horizon 2020 and along the knowledge chain. So far, the structure has not always been successful in creating real networks of interaction between different actors, in particular in its societal challenges and to a certain extent also in the industrial leadership.

It is clear that the synergies are not exploited to their full potential. European Commission could encourage the Member States to use the possibilities creatively and e.g. earmark a certain percentage of the structural funds to H2020 synergy in the form of additional top ups. Clear guidelines and examples of successful practices should be made available, so that opportunities for synergies and capacity building in research and innovation could be included the programmes already when planning the new programming period.

There are now acting nine contractual PPPs (cPPP) and seven institutional PPPs, that are split into five Joint Technology Initiatives (JTIs) and two Joint Undertakings. In addition to those there is also European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT) with seven KIC's and one more coming in 2018. At the moment, hardly anyone has a comprehensive knowledge of all the calls and funding available on those funding instruments. Openness, transparency, information and proposal procedures vary quite much between funding instruments. A good question is that do we really need so many instruments which are "outside" of Framework Programme funding. Because of this fragmentation is very challenging for the applicants.

The combination of the Framework Programme with the EU Cohesion policy and other policies must be further developed and intensified. The EU Framework Programmes and the Structural and Investment funds have always had, and continue to have, different objectives and focuses. It is essential that each funding programme covers those subjects and areas which are most suitable for the respective programme. However, we welcome gladly the efforts made in simplification in H2020 in regard to budget regulations, rules for participation, official signatures of project documents and more intensified use of the H2020 Participant Portal also to other European funding instruments. Also other best practices from H2020 such as the guarantee fund could be used more widely in other EU funding instruments.

Future visions

In addition to securing sufficient budget for future research and innovation programmes, it is important that the programmes continue to provide opportunities which allow universities to participate. The research and innovation universities rely on grants. We welcome the development of financial instruments which leverage the R&I investments. However, they should not affect the budget of grants but rather bring additional means to secure the funding for the whole value chain of research and innovation.

Information about the possibility of including **loan-based** budget to the future framework programme instead of an entirely grant-based approach is a great concern for the universities. Although there might be advantages for a loan-based approach for innovation projects that are implemented closer to the market side, there is a common understanding within the research community that a loan based approach will never benefit research and innovation projects of low TRL. A loan-based approach is not suitable for the Universities which all are public entities in Finland. Although the European Commission claims that the investments of the new European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI) will provide a

return for research and innovation, there are no evidence so far that Universities would have benefitted².

There is a political trend to move the next framework programme towards more **innovative** approaches. That relates to the development of the European Innovation Council. The emphasis of funding for collaborative research has shifted too much to projects with higher TRL. Without strong basic research there will be less innovation. Therefore, one of the most important aspects that must be reinforced in the next programme is basic research funding. Universities Finland wants to highlight that it is vital to have **balanced funding for the whole research and innovation chain**, including more funding for blue sky collaborative projects with a lower TRL. Focusing funding only for excellent science and innovation, will not lead to smart, sustainable and inclusive growth and jobs in Europe.

² See: [“One year of EFSI: What's in it for universities? An EUA review”](#)