

How do the selected stakeholders perceive the EU framework programmes?

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Summary

The article compares the positions of selected organizations for the public consultation of the European Commission on the past, present, and future of the European Research and Innovation Framework Programmes for the 2014–2027 era. Seven topics, that the selected organizations perceived as essential, were identified during the search of these documents. Financial rules, place of missions in the framework programme, synergies with other EU programmes, shortcomings in evaluation reports, implementation of EIC tools, widening participation and reducing the administrative burden of the framework programme. Requirements for clarity, comprehensibility, user-friendliness, and transparency of the framework programme were mentioned across these topics.

On 1st December 2022, the European Commission launched a public consultation focusing on the past, present and future of the EU framework programmes for research and innovation in 2014–2027 era. In the 12-week period, the stakeholders had the opportunity to fill out a questionnaire with those foci:

- feedback on the Horizon 2020 programme (2014–2020),
- positive and negative aspects of the current Horizon Europe programme,
- Horizon Europe strategic plan for the period 2025–2027,
- collection of key lessons, experiences, and implications for the future of framework programmes.

And just to the last point of that questionnaire, the stakeholders were allowed to attach a position paper with an opinion on the above-mentioned themes. The Technology Centre Prague prepared its own position paper [1] and studied position papers of another 11 stakeholders:

- Polish Chamber of Commerce for High Technology (Iztech) [2],
- The Netherlands Federation of University Medical Centres (NFU) [3],
- Fraunhofer-Gesellschaft [4],
- Association of European Research Establishments in Aeronautics (EREA) [5],
- European Association of Research Managers and Administrators (EARMA) [6],
- European Association of Research and Technology Organizations (EARTO) [7],
- Science Europe [8],
- European University Association (EUA) [9],
- League of European Research Universities (LERU) [10],

- Conference of European Schools for Advanced Engineering Education and Research (CESAER) [11],
- Young European Research Universities (YERUN) [12].

Their position papers were published mostly in February 2023.

During the search of these position papers, the most frequently represented topics were identified. The topic of financial rules and lump sum model of financing was the most represented, it was mentioned in 11 position papers. The second most frequently represented theme was missions and partnerships (mentioned in 10 documents), and in third place was synergy and complementarities (mentioned in 9 documents). In fourth place (mentioned 8-times) was the topic of proposal evaluations. In more than half of the papers studied, the themes of the EIC instruments, widening participation and administrative burdens were represented. Stakeholders' positions on these topics will be discussed in more detailed description in following chapters.

Financial rules

The main topic discussed in this chapter is the lump sum model of financing, i.e. financing not based on actual costs, but in the form of a fixed amount specified in the grant agreement. The positions of stakeholders on lump sum financing differ. The position papers of TC Prague and Iztech sound positively for lump sum model of financing and perceive it as a simplification of administrative requirements.

The position papers of EREA, EARMA, Science Europe, LERU and YERUN, on the other hand, point to the undesirable effects of lump sum funding, which can lead to its failure. According to them, it increases the administrative complexity and costs of project preparation. The ambiguity of the rules can then lead to a decrease in trust between partners in research consortia. In connection with the current high level of inflation in Europe, EARTO and YERUN refer in their position papers to the negative feedback of their members regarding the quantification of personal costs (the reference values for evaluators became quickly out-dated).

Fraunhofer-Gesellschaft, EARTO and LERU point out, that at the time of writing the position papers, no data are available for the assessment of lump sum model of financing. Before its further expansion, or before preparing the Horizon Europe strategic plan for the period 2025-2027, it is necessary to wait for the evaluation of the entire life cycle of larger and more complex projects financed by this model. In addition to the need for a proper evaluation, the LERU calls for European Commission's clear communication, clear rules, and documentation for lump sum financing.

When talking about financial rules, it is also important to mention the topic of the framework programme budget. If this topic was mentioned in the position paper, then the stakeholders mostly criticized the instability of the budget – specifically the annual changes, the conciliation procedure regarding the programme budget, changes in allocations and the introduction of new EU initiatives financed from the framework programme budget. As a concrete example, *New European Bauhaus* (the creative and interdisciplinary initiative related with the Green Deal) was named twice (the budget of the pilot phase of this initiative for the period 2021-2022 was €85 million, i.e. 1 ‰ of the budget of the Horizon Europe programme [13]).

Résumé: The dominant topic within the financial rules was the lump sum model of financing. The position papers noted its undesirable effects (unclearness of the rules, administrative complexity, and costs of project preparation), or expressed themselves neutrally, emphasizing the need to evaluate its impact. The second most frequent topic was the instability of the framework programme budget – it was perceived negatively by stakeholders.

Missions and partnership

In the Horizon Europe programme, the new concept of missions – ambitious research and innovation activities, which are relevant to a significant part of the European population (cancer, water, soil and healthy food, adaptation to climate change, climate neutral and smart cities) – was perceived critically in the studied position papers. Most often (in 5 position papers), the lack of connection of missions with the national and regional level and their almost no inclusion in national and regional development and innovation strategies were mentioned.

Also in the five position papers, the topic of mission financing was mentioned. EREA, EARTO and LERU called for a budget, (1) that would be intended directly for missions, (2) that would not draw funds from other parts of the Horizon Europe programme and (3) that would benefit from synergies with other EU instruments (e.g. ESIF, EFSI, Connecting Europe Facility, Digital Europe Programme). CESAER then called for a maximum mission budget limit of 10% of the annual budget of the Pillar II. In the four position papers, the unclear connection of the missions to the Pillar II was generally stated. A concrete example are the Iztech's and LERU's complaints about the setting of the Cancer Mission and its insufficient connection to the Health Cluster in the Pillar II. Complaints about the complex structure of mission settings, their non-transparency and difficulty in orientation were equally represented.

At least 3 documents also criticized the delayed implementation of the mission concept and the questionable impact of the missions, with EARTO recommending not to introduce new missions in the Horizon Europe strategic plan for the period 2025-2027.

In the case of the Partnership institute, complaints were mostly directed at its heterogeneity, fragmentation, non-transparency ("a closed shop, which is not open to new entrants"), chaos and administrative complexity, although its simplicity was originally promised. These negative aspects were mentioned by 6 stakeholders. In three cases, calls were made for greater openness of the Partnership institute to potential new participants from research organizations and businesses.

Résumé: The introduction of missions is viewed critically across position papers. The main comments are the unclear link to the Pillar II, lack of linkage with national and regional strategies, complex mission setting structure and calls for a separate budget dedicated directly to missions.

Synergies and complementarities

The topic of synergy, or complementarity or compatibility with other financial instruments (e.g. European Regional Development Fund, European Defence Fund, Innovation Fund, Recovery and Resilience Facility) and EU programmes (Digital Europe Programme, EU4Health, LIFE, EU Space Programme, Erasmus+) had in most rather declarative character. There were vague statements in position papers, that there is a need to use synergies, that synergies are a way to deepen European integration, that synergies lead to the effective spending of funds on research and development, etc. The need for synergy with national and regional programmes to support research, development and innovation was also mentioned. On the other hand, the stakeholders also called for concrete measures – for clear and transparent information about other EU's financial instruments and programmes (e.g. in the form of an internet portal, dissemination of examples of good practice or professional guidance). As a suitable example of a historically functioning synergy, Iztech mentioned the connection between the Seal of Excellence and the European Fund for Regional Development in the Horizon 2020 programme.

The theme of complementarity refers to the broad setting of clusters in the Pillar II. As an example, Fraunhofer-Gesellschaft mentioned Cluster 6, which includes natural resources, agriculture, food production, the bioeconomy, and the environment. The need to link the framework programme with EU political priorities (so-called green and digital transformation) and with sectors of strategic importance (defence industry, space, information and communication technologies, digital and emerging technologies, advanced materials) was also mentioned.

The topic of complementarities is also related to the issue of setting the themes/calls of the framework programme. CESAER spoke in favour of their top-down setting by the European Commission. On the contrary, EARMA, for example, spoke in favour of bottom-up setting through associations of research organizations, universities, and businesses.

Résumé: The topic of synergies with other EU programmes is rather only declarative in most position papers. However, the stakeholders called for accessible, clear, and transparent information about other European programmes and sources of funding. The broad settings of the clusters in the Pillar II (e.g. Cluster 5 or 6) and limited interconnection of the framework programme with EU's political priorities were perceived negatively by stakeholders.

Evaluation of projects

In the topic of project evaluation, the position papers most often focused on two basic things. The first of these was the quality and detail of the Evaluation Summary Reports, that are sent to the project coordinators at the end of the evaluation (reported by 5 stakeholders). Individual stakeholders viewed this topic differently. E.g. the TC Prague rather positively, however some improvement was also recommended. On the contrary, NFU, EARMA and EARTO were negative, and Science Europe was slightly displeased. The NFU, EARMA and EARTO have openly criticized the low quality of the Evaluation Summary Reports, which are useless for the applicant as they do not provide him with proper feedback. Science

Europe stated that "evaluators should be better trained..., to provide more substantial feedback and guarantee the highest quality of evaluation" (p. 11).

The second most common topic was the so-called blind evaluation, where the evaluator in the first round of the call does not have access to information about the applicant of the evaluated proposal in order to treat the applicants equally (e.g. regardless of their organization or country of origin). Even in this case, the position papers had opposing views. Iztech perceived the introduction of this type of assessment positively. On the contrary, EARTO was against, arguing the COST program, where this type of assessment was tested with a negative result.

In two cases, the need for transparency of evaluation, clarity of rules, definition of evaluation procedures and evaluation criteria was generally mentioned.

Résumé: The topic of project evaluation was perceived contradictory by the position papers. That is especially true in the case of blind evaluations. On the other hand, in the case of the quality and detail of the Evaluation Summary Reports, the negative perception prevailed, as they do not provide usable feedback to the applicant.

European Innovation Council

On a general level, the existence of the European Innovation Council's instruments is positively evaluated. But on closer inspection, several shortcomings were also mentioned. In three cases, the intellectual property rights in the EIC instruments were concerned, as they are different from the rest of the Horizon Europe programme. However, the position papers did not find common ground to solve this issue – CESAER vaguely proposed to use examples of good practice when adjusting intellectual property rights, Science Europe only generally mentioned the need to resolve this difference. LERU pointed out, that interfering with the established standards of intellectual property protection can cause more harm than good.

Fraunhofer-Gesellschaft and Science Europe consider the *Pathfinder* instrument (focused on the initial research of new ideas with the aim of applying them in future radical new technologies) successful. On the other hand, Fraunhofer-Gesellschaft notices the excessive interest in this instrument, the low success rate of applicants and the disparity between the time for the preparation of the project proposal and the possible benefit in case of its eventual approval. Science Europe recommends increasing the EU contribution to Pathfinder Open calls.

The *Accelerator* instrument, aimed at supporting small and medium-sized enterprises capable of introducing a risky but European breakthrough innovation to the market, met with strong criticism from Science Europe. Problems in its implementation, especially in long-term financing, may threaten the reputation of the European Innovation Council.

Fraunhofer-Gesellschaft then criticized the narrow definition of the *Transition* instrument, which – although focused on the verification of new technologies in the laboratory and application environment and the development of the business model of innovation – ultimately does not allow the applicants to unlock their potential. Fraunhofer-Gesellschaft also recommends open the *Transition* instrument for successful projects from the Pillar II.

Problems in the implementation of the instruments of the European Innovation Council are also mentioned in the TC Prague's position paper – delays in prefinancing provided to companies, the complexity of the AI tool for communication between applicants and evaluators and finance providers, the quality of the Evaluation Summary Reports, feedback provided to evaluators on the quality and relevance of their reports, and time the experts have for the evaluation in relation with the scope of the full application.

Résumé: In general, the existence of the EIC instruments is welcome. On the other hand, the position papers most often drew attention to the need to resolve (1) the intellectual property rights for the outputs of these instruments and (2) the implementation of these instruments. The EIC Pathfinder instrument was viewed positively, but under-allocation of funds may reduce its potential. For the EIC Accelerator instrument, attention was drawn to the need to resolve its long-term financing.

Widening participation

The Widening Participation and Spreading Excellence programme is positively perceived. However, Science Europe – as the only one – recognizes that "the Widening Participation and Spreading of Excellence programme, ..., could not solve the challenge of asymmetric participation, including amongst the 'widening countries'" (p. 7). Low research and innovation performance of 'widening countries' is caused by deep-rooted socio-economic factors. However, Iztech came up with a proposal, that the evaluation criteria of project proposals also could consider the representation of participants from 'widening countries.' It claims that the introduction of such a criterion will not violate the principle of excellence of research and innovation projects. However, due to the economic geography of Europe, the opposite, or only the formal addition of partners from 'widening countries' to the consortia can be expected. A similar approach is also found in the position paper of the EUA, which, among other things, proposes, that the Horizon Europe programme could be one of the tools of the EU's regional policy.

The position papers of Iztech, EARTO and Science Europe perceived the building of research and development capacities, knowledge transfer and expertise building (e.g. training of research and development managers, experts for open science, involvement of researchers in relevant networks) as an important element of expanding the participation of 'widening countries' in framework programmes.

Regarding specific tools, Twinning, Teaming, ERA Chairs were perceived positively, and it is recommended to continue them. In this case, LERU only recommended, that calls could be announced and deadlines for the submission of project proposals could be set at regular intervals. The importance of the Twinning tool for the advancement of research and development in the countries of the Western Balkans was also emphasized.

On the contrary, the Hop-on tool was received mostly with embarrassment and most stakeholders recommended its evaluation and elimination of shortcomings. Complaints were directed at the user-unfriendliness of the tool, unclear rules, and the problematic entry of new partners into the running project.

Résumé: The Widening Participation and Spreading Excellence programme is generally well received. Its tools Twinning, Teaming and ERA Chairs were also positively received. Conversely, the Hop-on tool was criticized by most stakeholders for its shortcomings. Some stakeholders also called for further building of research and development capacities as an important condition for increasing the participation of 'widening countries' in framework programmes.

Administrative burden

Fraunhofer-Gesellschaft, EARMA, and EUA take note of the European Commission's statement on the simplification of administration in the Horizon Europe programme. NFU, EARMA, EUA, and YERUN in their position papers generally talk about the need to reduce the administrative burden on applicants and beneficiaries and take this public consultation as an opportunity to do so. Fraunhofer-Gesellschaft and EARTO note, that the reduction of the administrative burden proclaimed by the European Commission often leads to the opposite effect during the preparation and implementation of the project – it increases the costs of participating in the programme for applicants and beneficiaries and reduces their success rate. The gender equality plan, the data management plan, the principle of doing no significant harm or the concept of open science are mentioned as examples of measures, that lead to an increase in administrative burden. During the preparation of the 10th Framework Programme, EARTO requires an analysis of these requirements, and Fraunhofer-Gesellschaft is in favour of their eventual deletion.

Résumé: Most of the position papers perceive this European Commission's public consultation as an opportunity to further reduce the administrative complexity of the Horizon Europe programme. From the reduction in administrative complexity, stakeholders promise themselves more interest in the framework programme, reduction of error rates and lower costs for the preparation of proposals.

The other topics commonly mentioned in position papers

The seven most frequently addressed topics in position papers were described in previous chapters. Even so, it is appropriate, at least partially, to mention other important topics, that were discussed in the six position papers.

- The need for quality implementation of the framework programme not only through its simplification, but also through clear rules, documents and available and relevant instructions and advice.
- Providing applicants with an official annotated Model Grant Agreement by the European Commission as quickly as possible.
- Calls for greater involvement of social sciences and humanities in the framework programme.
- The issue of gender equal representation – 5 of the 6 position papers do welcome the introduction of gender equality plans in organizations applying for funds from the framework programme, but at the same time draw attention to the shortcomings of this measure in the form of redundant administration, irrelevance of gender

equality for certain research topics and moral risk brought by this tool (adding women pro forma into research teams),

- Open science – associations of universities and research organizations dealing with the topic of research and innovation "from a broad perspective" were in favour of continuing the implementation of this approach. On the other hand, organizations closer to the application sphere perceived this approach as another administrative claim bringing confusion to the framework programme's implementation.

Résumé: Other prominently represented topics were the need for quality programme implementation, greater involvement of social sciences and humanities in programme, addressing gender equality question and the concept of open science.

Conclusion

By researching 12 position papers of stakeholders dealing with research, development, innovation and higher education, current and urgent topics of the Horizon Europe programme were identified. Particularly, the lump sum funding; the unclear anchoring of missions in the framework programme; calls for availability of relevant information about other EU programmes and national and regional programmes; the un-usability of Evaluation Summary Reports; the implementation of the instruments of the European Innovation Council; the widening of participation; and the reduction of the programme's administrative hurdles. To a lesser extent, also the need for quality implementation of the framework programme, greater involvement of social sciences and humanities, implementation of gender equality plans and the concept of open science were mentioned. The requirements for clarity, comprehensibility, user-friendliness, and transparency of the Horizon Europe programme run through the position papers as a thread. It will be therefore interesting to see, how the European Commission will approach these topics. Whether the conclusions from this public consultation will be reflected in the Strategic Plan of the Horizon Europe programme for the 2025–2027 era and in the preparation of the 10th Framework Programme.

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