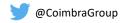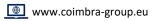# Position Paper

Past, present, and future of the European Research & Innovation Framework programmes 2014-2027

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Past, present, and future of the European Research & Innovation Framework programmes 2014-2027

1. PREAMBLE

The Coimbra Group (CG) is an association of 41 long-established European multidisciplinary universities of high international standard. This position paper is the reflection of a collective effort led by the CG Research Support Officers Working Group (WG) with the input from the Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH), Equality and Diversity and Doctoral Studies WGs, the CG Executive Board and the CG office. Since the consultation on the '**Past, present and future of the European Research & Innovation Framework programmes 2014-2027**' was launched at the beginning of December 2022, and given the extremely tight deadline to respond, all participants in the preparation of this document have followed an intense work schedule to identify the key Research and Innovation (R&I) messages that are developed in the following pages.

This position paper has been structured into three parts (past, present and future), which are arranged in a chronological order. In the first section we focus on Horizon 2020, on the positive changes it had brought compared to its predecessors and on the missed opportunities. In the second section we focus on the present, on Horizon Europe, from an implementation and management perspective. We have identified a series of aspects that we consider need to be improved in order to maximize the impact of the current Framework Programme (FP). Finally, in the last section we focus on the strategic and political aspects for the future, on those changes that we would like to see reflected in the 10th FP.

2. PAST: ex-post evaluation of Horizon 2020

CG universities proved in H2020 to be an important driver for R&I. During the whole duration of the 8th FP our university members participated in more than 5.100[1] projects, **14.40% of all signed grants**:

- 25% of all Research and Innovation Actions (RIA), Innovation Actions (IA) and Coordination and Support Actions (CSA) projects awarded from Pillar II.
- 12.5% of all European Research Funding (ERC) funded grants.
- 15.5% of all Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) funded projects.

These figures position the **CG as one of the largest players in the field of EU R&I** and show our great relevance not only as project implementers but also as policy contributors.

Regarding research areas, in terms of funded projects CG universities were more successful in Societal Challenge 6 (Europe in a changing world - inclusive, innovative and reflective societies) as well as in the SSH panels from the ERC programme.

We are particularly satisfied with a number of important features taken up by the 8th FP for R&I:

- A substantial increase in the budget up to 80 billion € as a lower limit turned Horizon 2020 into the world's biggest R&I programme ever. This confirmed the common vision for R&I as a key driver for the European Union (EU) competitiveness and increased well-being of its citizens.
- **Horizon 2020 reinforced strong features of its predecessors**, such as the focus on excellent fundamental and frontier research. This was demonstrated in particular by the success of the ERC programme.
- In comparison to previous R&I FPs, implementing procedures were simplified with a unique set of rules, clearer reporting and cost accounting methods, and fewer controls and audits. These simplification efforts made Horizon 2020 more accessible, more attractive and easier to navigate for applicants.
- Horizon 2020 set up an optimal architecture in which public and private actors could work together in an international context with increased global collaboration and cross-border long standing cooperation.
- Horizon 2020 helped with enabling and enhancing career development opportunities, fair treatment, and talent circulation of individual researchers at all stages, in particular through MSCA.

In addition to this overall positive assessment of Horizon 2020, the CG would also like to share **key considerations to take into account for improving the current programme**, and when designing future EU R&I FPs:

- CG endorses the change towards a **more balanced approach between top-level and bottom-up calls than under Horizon 2020**. It is important not to prescribe too detailed research topics to ensure that excellent projects and excellent and innovative researchers effectively be the main beneficiaries of EU funding.

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[1] Source: Horizon Dashboard https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/dashboard/sense/app/98dcd94d-ca66-4ce0-865b-48ffe7f19f35/sheet/KVdtQ/state/analysis

- Horizon 2020 saw an increase in the number of IAs in comparison to its predecessors, requiring Technology Readiness Levels (TRL) higher than 4-5 in the topic descriptions. CG believes that the concept of TRLs is based on a too simplistic linear approach to innovation which does not fully seize the complex and complete extent of the R&I chain and that does not incorporate non-technological forms of innovation generated by fundamental and applied research. It is well established that addressing global challenges needs fresh insights from basic research approaches. **Therefore, a re-balancing of TRL coverage, allowing research to address lower TRL levels under the same calls, would have provided valuable alternatives**.

- Success rates remained problematically low across many areas of H2020 due to budgetary limitations and oversubscription. Up to 88% of all proposals did not receive funding, including many high-quality applications where institutions had allocated significant resources in their preparation. CG considers that an **increased funding, an extended use of two-stage proposals, and a more complementary approach between national and EU funding programmes** would have helped to improve the success rates, and managed the effort dedicated.

- Despite the progress made in this regard, Horizon 2020 continued to be associated with a **high administrative burden**.

- Horizon 2020 gradually incorporated over the years **elements widening far beyond the R&I scope** at the expense of further support for highly competitive and prestigious programmes such as the ERC and MSCA, which remained significantly underfunded.

- Horizon 2020 was designed with SSH integration into each priority of the successive work programmes. However, **CG SSH scientists report they did not perceive their participation in the proposals were on equal footing with that of other scientists**, but rather as an ultimate effort to improve the proposal's score in specific work packages. The approach of flagging topics and the concept of SSH integration is in itself erroneous as it implicitly/automatically suggests 'adding in' rather than 'being a part of'. Instead of having a list of flagged topics, the integration of SSH disciplines into the calls could be better accomplished with the involvement of relevant SSH profiles in the initial formulation of the strategic research agenda. **The inclusion of qualified experts in the evaluation panels in the future could also guarantee a better and more reliable assessment of the integration of SSH disciplines.**

3. PRESENT: mid-term evaluation of Horizon Europe

CG universities continue to perform in Horizon Europe as one of the most important drivers for R&I. **Since the 9th FP started, our university members have participated in 948[2] projects, representing 21% of all the grants signed:**

- 26% of all RIA, IA and CSA projects awarded from Pillar II.
- 11.7% of all ERC funded grants.
- 20.8% of all MSCA funded projects.

SSH remain the research area where CG universities are the most successful when it comes to funded projects under the ERC programme.

In the context of the Horizon Europe mid-term review, CG would like to point out the following key aspects to be further analysed and improved in the coming years:

Evaluation

While we initially perceived an overall lack of consistency in the assessment of the 2021 proposals, an increase in the quality of the Evaluation Summary Reports (ESRs) was positively observed with the 2022 calls. However, CG believes **ESRs still need to improve. They should be more specific** to help researchers understand what the real weaknesses or strengths of their proposal are. We also believe more information needs to be provided to applicants on how their proposal is ranked in the overall scoring and, where relevant, placed on the reserve list. This would be useful and help the consortia to improve, as well as progress in the search for the relevant funding instrument for their research ideas.

We support the Seal of Excellence (SoE) concept, as a quality label that can help streamlining research funding application processes and, if properly implemented, would avoid duplication of efforts for researchers with the different funding agencies involved. The SoE assumes that national or regional funders will provide resources to carry out excellent projects which cannot be funded by the FP because of budgetary limitations. However, it is far from having reached its full potential. In particular, we believe that except in some successful cases, neither public nor private investors have yet seen the value of the current label. This situation has generated concerns, or even criticism in the academic community.

We recommend:

- To provide evaluators with more training and guidance to improve consistency in the proposals' assessment through the whole FP life.
- To define clear rules for AI support in proposals.
- The EC to investigate existing barriers and obstacles that are preventing the efficient implementation of the Seal of Excellence, and foster the roll-out of appropriate solutions to overcome them.

Timing

The number of instruments and WPs is much larger than under Horizon 2020. This has led to an overlapping of various timeframes and deadlines, which in return has negatively affected the comprehensiveness of the FP. CG also believes that the calendar of the first Horizon Europe calls has been challenging for applicants, specifically for Pillar II topics. Lead time from confirmation of final WPs drafts to the first calls' deadlines was extremely short. This has prevented consortia from collating high quality proposals and can be especially discouraging for newcomers to the FP.

The implementation of the current FP is supported by 2-year WPs but they are not continuous, which leads to gaps and prevents researchers from being adequately prepared since the design of the calls is not open nor transparent enough, and drafts are not officially made publicly available by the EC.

We recommend:

- To disperse evenly the deadlines throughout the calendar year to avoid negative impact on administrative processes.
- To avoid collisions with major common European holidays as this creates serious disadvantages for researchers with caring responsibilities.
- To ensure continuity in the roll-out of the successive Work Programmes, e.g. with the following structure: 2021-2022, 2022-2023, 2023-2024, 2024-2025, 2025-2026, 2026-2027.

Calls and topics

The WPs are rather complex and finding the right call for proposals can be difficult. Furthermore, the rules for participation of partners outside of Member States (MS)/Associated Countries (AC) are not precise enough. While they are eligible for funding, it is not clear if a strong justification for their involvement in the project is still required. **Strengthening EU's cooperation with 'third-countries' should be addressed clearly**, while avoiding confusing terms such as those used in certain actions and calls (e.g., 'not automatically supported'), and providing guidance for types, degrees and availability of European support for the involvement of third-countries' partners.

We therefore recommend:

- To include relevant policy documents as footnotes within the calls' documents. This would allow proper consideration and allow for submissions in line with what the European Commission (EC) wants to fund.
- To reconsider the use of the term "associated partners", which does not refer to partners coming from AC. This can lead to confusion.
- To implement a more accessible process for agenda setting and drafting of the WPs.
- To transparently describe the importance of including third-countries partners in R&I consortia, and the specific European support to apply for to ensure their active involvement.

Proposal preparation and Project management

Horizon Europe guides and documents have been published later than expected, causing uncertainties and confusions among applicants and research managers. Basically, templates for proposals now follow the same structure as in H2020, except for the 45-page limit for RIAs and IAs, and 30-page limit for CSAs in Part B. This drastic reduction does not do justice to the new emphasis placed on impact and implementation, as it significantly reduces the space to provide relevant information on these two sections. Additionally, some redundancies in the information requested lead to an inefficient use of the page limit.

As the Annotated Model Grant Agreement (AMGA) has not been published yet, budgets for 2023 proposals are calculated without knowing the exact final rules. Also, the first projects have already started and they have to be managed and monitored without any clear guidance on essential aspects, especially how eligible personnel costs can be determined and if/how contributed time for the project has to be documented. From what we have seen in the drafts of the AMGA so far, we are very concerned about the possible simplification of the financial administration. For the documentation of work (time-sheets/declarations) and the calculation of staff costs we do not see any substantial progress in comparison with Horizon 2020 rules, except for the increased use of the lump sum model.

We recommend:

- To release a clear guidance, and all the documents necessary for the proposal preparation and the project implementation, on the same day as the WPs at the latest.
- To avoid redundancies. Information around budget justification (table 3.1g, h, i and j) should be included with Part A as these can take up considerable space in Part B when consortia are large.
- To simplify the documentation of time spent on the project and the calculation of personnel cost, far beyond what has been released in early versions of the draft AMGA.
- To drop the mixed use of actual personnel cost with hourly rates, to simplify the determination of eligible personnel costs.

Funding models

CG acknowledges that lump sum funding may reduce the burden post award for all projects. At the same time, we would like to point out the increased effort in the pre-award phase, for both the Part B and budget development, for all proposals. We consider that the broader use of lump sum funding, especially for large collaborative research projects, still needs more testing and piloting before its generalisation.

We recommend:

- To continue ensuring that the lump sum model is only used for 2 stage calls and not for single stage calls, as was the case for some 2022 topics.
- To ensure better guidance on the implementation of the lump sum model, especially during the consortium agreement phase.

Impact

CG considers that the need for impact indirectly tends to push the coordinators to over-promise beyond the expected outcomes.

We recommend:

- To have more diverse examples for both applicants and evaluators of the pathways to impact.
- To provide applicants with a better formulation and more precise information on expected impact in both the short and long term.
- To allow more flexibility in the applicants' approaches to impact.

Social Sciences and Humanities

CG welcomes the commitment of the EC to support SSH integration in Pillar II and, more in general, the ambition to foster a "human centric" approach across all research areas in order to build an equitable and just society, while addressing the main socio-economic transitions. However, the contribution of SSH disciplines is still not fully embedded: SSH continue to be considered 'supporting disciplines' in calls outside Cluster 2 that are targeted to, and led by, STEM fields. The SSH "labelling" itself does not reflect the variety and diversity of disciplinary fields and approaches that are unevenly involved in collaborative research across the programme; in particular, the EC monitoring reports on SSH integration in Horizon 2020 showed that humanities and the arts are weakly represented if compared to other disciplinary groupings from the social sciences, such as economics, business and political science.

CG calls for an improvement of the implementation of SSH integration at different levels, and in particular: design of calls and topics; evaluation criteria; composition of evaluation panels. The SSH flagging of topics in Pillar II should be accompanied by effective monitoring mechanisms. Regularly assessing the quality of SSH integration is crucial to promptly address and adjust bottlenecks in the implementation process. Moreover, it is critical to avoid the confusion between, on one side, SSH integration, referring to the integration of scientific perspectives from humanities, social sciences and the arts; and on the other side, cross-sectoral collaborations with partners working in social sectors (such as Civil Society Organisations). Thus, integration of the SSH perspectives should not be confused with the citizen engagement approach.

We recommend:

- To include SSH experts in the initial design of the strategic plan and the WPs.
- To guarantee an appropriate representation of SSH experts in the evaluation panels of SSH-flagged topics.
- To describe more explicitly the expected role of SSH research in the SSH flagged topics. There should be realistic suggestions of the SSH disciplines and their expected contribution in terms of scope and results, taking into consideration the variety of disciplines that are incorporated within the SSH area and the differences between SSH approaches.

- To consider as a major shortcoming, in the evaluation of SSH flagged topics, the lack of SSH disciplines and participants with suitable tasks.
- To establish clear monitoring mechanisms, i.e. regular reporting on SSH integration results and an setting up an expert group with monitoring and advisory functions that could keep reflecting on how to improve SSH integration and, more broadly, interdisciplinarity. CG stands ready to provide expertise and policy advice from across its membership on how best to achieve this goal.

Gender dimension

CG welcomes the introduction of the Gender Equality Plan (GEP) requirement, the focus on integration of the gender dimension into research and innovation content, and the thematic area within GEPs to include measures against gender-based violence, including sexual harassment. This has certainly been an incentive for universities to systematize policies into an action plan, and to create a multi-annual vision and strategic planning. However, to make it a real and lasting shift, a further change in perspective including cultural norms and values is necessary. The lack of paid family/career leave in EU research grants is a serious concern. We also endorse more attention towards a broader inclusiveness regarding, for instance, disability, ethnicity and LGBTQI+.

An important example is the ex aequo rankings. The third ranking criteria states: "If necessary, the gender balance among the personnel [...] will be used as a factor for prioritisation". We understand that this ranking of applications results in those proposals with a M:F ratio as close to 50:50 being ranked first. Thus, those applications with more females than males, within a consortium, would be ranked lower. This has led lead female researchers to be removed from consortia, and replaced with male colleagues, as well as the reverse. For disciplines where the gender imbalance is in a higher female representation (e.g. nursing and some social sciences), this mechanism may compound the issues it was intended to alleviate.

We recommend:

- To put in place **clearer indications as to how the gender dimension in research content is assessed, both in terms of weight attributed and of process/evaluator's experience**.
- To further consider **inclusiveness and diversity, beyond the strict focus on gender equality**.
- To contemplate **stronger synergies and connections with other European funding programmes in this area.**
- To reconsider how **this ex aequo ranking criterion is utilised so as to not discourage female participation when a 50-50 M:F requirement is seen as optimal**. Some disciplines can typically be more male/female dominated and this might need to be accounted for.
- To provide funding for family/care through the research instruments to ensure researchers taking maternity leave in particular, are not catapulted into poverty with no income.

Missions

The long-term funding and planning perspective of the missions beyond a FP is seen as a positive move. However, two major concerns remain: whether the missions' development, inclusion, and funding by, Horizon Europe is justified; and whether their inclusion in MS' national strategies will progress to the extent necessary for their success. There have been low application rates in the R&I missions. The low attractiveness of these calls might be related to the lack of opportunities for collaborative research and innovation activities. We also consider that missions should not cannibalise funding in clusters. **Horizon Europe should be focused on funding R&I activities exclusively; otherwise its focus could be diluted.**

We recommend:

- To better highlight the role and essential contributions of researchers and universities for the achievement of the missions' objectives.
- To include scientists and universities, beyond setting the overall goals, and especially in the process of how missions can be integrated into Horizon Europe.
- To introduce topics targeting projects at lower TRL, and include opportunities for smaller projects (easier to prepare and manage), which would allow a better involvement of the universities in the missions.
- To include the missions' calls only in the relevant WPs of the clusters.
- To strengthen the intrinsic public value of research and the role of universities to provide societally relevant directions to innovation, as public spaces that bring all the actors of the innovation ecosystem together.
- To make sure that budget allocation of the missions does not exceed 10% of the budget for Pillar II.

Widening

Horizon Europe's Widening actions are welcome for their impact on low R&I performing countries. However, the better inclusion of project partners from widening countries remains as one of the key challenges in the current FP. Reasons for this seems to be largely systemic, meaning that there is the need to introduce further support measures or revise the ones currently in place.

The widening label should not be received as a burden and alibi for not including the partners from widening countries as "standard" project partners, rather as a support for countries with less funding from the FP. At the same time, measures such as dedicated calls and hop-on facility should not discourage partners from widening countries to take part in other parts of the FP.

We recommend:

- To dedicate European Structural Funds to improve research capacity of less competitive regions in the field of R&I, instead of labelling the topics.
- To incentivise the inclusion of partners from countries with less funding from the FP from the stage of proposal preparation, to encourage and ensure capacity building through authentic cooperation on equal terms, and to build further progress on researchers' and research officers' empowerment and belonging.
- To reflect on aspects such as why the level of participation for some widening countries is low (e.g. Romania had 44 Teaming proposals, and 0 projects funded); why the number of funded projects is low; which is the role of national governments in stimulating participation in EU R&I FPs, etc.
- To include equal relevant calls for all the widening countries (no more special calls for groups of countries), also involving them in the consultation process for the design of the future funding instruments.

Partnerships

CG believes that the planned improvements in simplification, accessibility and transparency of partnerships have not yet been realised. The integration of the partnerships in the Funding and Tenders portal is welcomed and should be monitored for impact on participation. However, there are still concerns about their implementation with calendar issues and delayed calls. We strongly support Partnerships as they contribute to the establishment of consortia through which project participants gain access to the unique knowledge and facilities of collaborating partners. Similarly, we welcome the opportunity they offer to develop own research agendas and secure funding.

We recommend:

- To further strengthen synergies with other European initiatives, such as the EU Missions.
- A live online overview of the status of each partnership would be beneficial.
- To better explain Partnerships to researchers with a focus on young researchers to avoid ending up with a closed club.
- To not only look at the performance when reviewing them, but to also include a critical analysis of the full partnership landscape, including their reduction in number and avoiding overlap between them in the next FP.

European Research Council

The already foreseen change in the evaluation of Principal Investigators' profiles under ERC calls and the increased relevance of the project proposal over the Principal Investigator's past achievements is well received by CG universities. On the other hand, the changes to the calculation of eligibility for STG and COG (from date of PhD conferral to date of successful PhD defence) have proven difficult to document for some applicants. This is because in many countries the awarding institutions have not kept records of the relevant dates. This is particularly the case for COG applicants where detailed academic transcript records are more than 12 years old.

As for the evaluation, we have observed quality control issues with ESRs and some errors in the panels' comments box misrepresenting or contradicting the information included in the individual reports. CG researchers have also experienced calendaring issues. For example, ERC-STG-2022 step 2 applicants did not receive their results until one week before the ERC-STG-2023 deadline. This does not leave sufficient time for applicants to incorporate the feedback from evaluators before resubmissions which can be time sensitive for those nearing the end of the eligibility window.

We recommend:
- To review the calendaring of evaluation cycles for STG and COG to leave a longer period between the receipt of results of one call and the deadline for submissions to the next.
- To provide specific guidance for what an applicant should do in the case where their institution does not have the relevant information on file to provide documentation. There should also be guidance on what constitutes official documentation of the PhD defence/pass date and clarification of whether email correspondence is acceptable.
- To have the final ESR reports be double checked by two ERCEA Scientific Officers (as opposed to one officer per panel).
- To offer a channel (e.g., via NCPs) through which to report any quality control issues that is not linked to the redress process, given that the latter is designed only to address major procedural errors only, but not other issues with evaluation.

Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions

The two main issues identified by the CG with the implementation of the MSCA are the continued low success rates on one side and the participation limits placed on institutions without substantial discretionary research funding available to subscribe participation, on the other side. Furthermore, if for all MSCA schemes the employment contract is clear in terms of obligations and rights for the researchers, the effective possibility to implement it ends up creating some inequalities due to existing limitations such as national rules, taxes, contractual rights, etc. This might impair the opportunity for researchers to receive the same treatment independently to the Member State in which they will perform their MSCA project.

As for the specific case of MSCA Doctoral Networks (DN), we still see a gap between research and innovation activities of doctoral students, as well as between 'academic' and 'non-academic' competences. There is still place for improvements in terms of real support for multi-, inter and trans-disciplinarity and for multiple collaborations.

Additionally, Country Correction Coefficients (CCC) for DN and Postdoctoral Fellowships (PF) living allowances' needs to be reconsidered, as they may explain the low number of ESRs choosing some countries as their research destinations. **Increasing the CCC for some of the eligible countries could improve the attractiveness for researchers from developed R&I countries to apply.**

We recommend:
- To adjust the flat rates for the personal costs to the collective working contracts of the countries.
- To set up a 48-months funding per fellow for all strands of Doctoral Networks to bring it in line with the heterogeneous duration of PhD theses across Europe (3 to 4 years).
- To increase living allowance costs for DN/PF to reflect the rise in costs of living since funding levels were established.
- To better align national legislations regarding PhD working conditions to avoid inequalities.
- To better define multi-, trans- and inter-disciplinary profiles of doctoral students, taking into account that they cannot be standardised.

Pillar II: Global Challenges and European Industrial Competitiveness

Horizon Europe, and in particular its Pillar II, is becoming 'over programmed'. The increasingly numerous existing political priorities and the introduction of additional ones with the strategic plans (e.g. Chips Act, Mediterranean initiative, etc.), without additional budget dilute the overall impact and what can be achieved though the FP. Over-programming within small and diminishing budgets limits the potential of individual research projects, precludes new and 'poorer' participants, and also deters excellent consortia from otherwise attractive programmes.

We consider the WPs quite complex and finding the right call for a particular proposal can be difficult. Understanding what the priorities are behind each call topic is not always clear. CG however welcomes the two-year work plans within Pillar II and the EU Missions, as well as the inclusion of more open two-stage calls, allowing researchers to co-identify problems and solutions with the relevant stakeholders.

We recommend:

- To include all relevant policy documents as footnotes within the calls documents. This would allow proper consideration and allow for submissions in line with what the EC aims to fund.

- To increase transparency on the process for agenda setting and drafting of WPs (consultation and advocacy) so that stakeholders can understand and contribute to the process.
- To provide with clearer rules for participation of partners outside of MS/AC. While countries may be eligible for funding, it is not clear if a strong justification for their involvement in the project is still required.

CG also believes that Horizon Europe Pillar II is currently falling short of the goal to build the best possible knowledge base in support of Europe's resilience in relation to global challenges. The current signal used to indicate which are the instruments intended to include basic research are often too ambiguous. Furthermore, this approach leads to a vicious circle where some researchers do not consider participating in Pillar II projections, and universities do no invest in support staff. More research driven than exploitation driven approaches are needed, as well as smaller scale RIAs and IAs. These types of actions would make it easier for younger researchers, SMEs and new actors to participate in the calls, and would set the ground to test creative ideas on a smaller scope.

We recommend:

- To provide clearer instructions on which are the instruments from Pillar II that are intended to include basic research.
- To introduce smaller scale topics with less detailed demands for specific activities and lower TRL thresholds.

Furthermore, Horizon Europe guides and documents have been published too slowly and sometimes after the call topics had actually opened, causing uncertainties and confusion among applicants and research managers. We welcome the reduction in the page limit for Pillar II applications from H2020. This allows the consortia to focus on what needs to be accomplished. However, some redundances in the information requested lead to the inefficient use of this limited page space.

We recommend:

- To publish the guides and documents necessary for the proposal preparation and project implementation the same day as the WPs at the latest.
- To avoid redundancies. For instance, the information around budget justification (table 3.1g, h, i and j) should rather be included within Part A as these can take up considerable space within Part B of the application where consortia are large.

As mentioned earlier, we have observed inconsistencies within the assessment of Pillar II proposals submitted to Horizon Europe. This was particularly noticed around the consideration of interdisciplinary research. The Evaluator Briefing Slides do not include any guidance on how to assess the multi-, trans- and inter-disciplinary aspects of the proposals, although this is an evaluation criterion. By contrast, guidance is provided on how to assess other cross-cutting issues like SSH integration and Open Science. It is widely acknowledged that disciplinary experts may lack the expertise to evaluate multi-, trans- and inter-disciplinary proposals especially if no guidance is

provided around what multi-, trans- and inter-disciplinary research entails and how it should be evaluated.

We recommend:

- To provide a short guidance note to aid evaluators in the assessment of multi-; trans- and inter-disciplinary research to increase consistency in evaluating such aspects and approaches.
- For two-stage proposals, to provide a more detailed feedback within the Stage 1 ESR and moreover, that this be shared with the relevant consortia when they successfully progress to Stage 2. Currently, this is shared after the Stage 2 review.

4. FUTURE: Horizon Europe Strategic Plan 2025-2027

Efforts towards greater clarity and transparency are recognized and appreciated, however, more still needs to be done in this direction. Thus, the Coimbra Group calls for the direct involvement and inclusion of university representatives at early stages of discussion concerning the strategic planning, in order to reinforce the transparency of the whole process and make the FP more relevant, accessible and attractive.

From our experience in the PAST and PRESENT, we advocate for the design of the 10th FP, to take on board the following key advancements:

a) Simplicity and better synergies with other funding sources.
b) Improved accessibility and Inclusiveness.
c) More Transparency and participation in the design process.
d) Increased budget.

a) Simplicity and better Synergies with other funding sources

Simplicity

The FPs have progressively evolved to cover an increasingly larger variety of objectives. To achieve these, over time, more actions, tools and criteria were added than removed. As a result, the programme's complexity has reached a level that can make it difficult for researchers to understand the full scope of opportunities for participation. As an important example, we have discussed above the distortions created by the introduction of the Missions in Horizon Europe and related possible barriers for researchers to participate and contribute. At the same time, the project administration remains overly complex in comparison with that of National Funding Programmes. As a result, researchers who successfully participate in the programme have to deal with a high administrative burden, or universities have to invest heavily in expert management staff in order to relieve them. We advocate for designing the next FP with simplification as a guiding principle.

We believe that simplifying the structure and the variety of actions, tools and criteria is the basis for designing an accessible and inclusive Programme, where researchers easily understand how to contribute to the FP goals. We suggest that this simplification be achieved by looking for possible

synergies within the framework programme itself. With the expansion of lump-sum calls and initial sets of measures meant to harmonise the administrative rules over the whole programme, a first step was made to redeem the standing of Horizon Europe as bureaucratic. However, from our experience this model is not optimal for all types of calls. Therefore, we strongly plea for a paradigm shift in the administrative approach to these calls in order to release researchers and the support offices from unnecessary paperwork.

We suggest:

- To design the next FP with simplification as guiding principle.
- To adopt a simpler structure and methods of participation as a prerequisite for accessibility.
- To look for new ways of reducing the administrative burden, e.g. Time-Sheets or Declarations. Lump-Sums have turned out to not be suitable for all calls.

Synergies

The R&I FPs imply a regional aspect and a role for its diverse actors, including universities. In order to achieve efficient synergies with Regional and National Programmes and other EU funding instruments, both on the project and on the policy levels, it is crucial to consider further harmonization of rules related to application procedures, state aids, costs justification, etc. National R&I funding strategies should align as much as possible with those of the FPs.

On the EU level, it is currently difficult for applicants to easily identify which activities are supported under the various EU programmes (beyond the FPs), creating sometimes unfortunate thematic overlaps and gaps between the different EU funding instruments. **Therefore, harmonisation should be also performed in close cooperation between the different EC Directorate-Generals**. This would definitely help strengthening the effective implementation of R&I in all four corners of the European knowledge square: Education, Research, Innovation and Service to Society.

Furthermore, CG universities note that a pan-European large-scale funding scheme for frontier innovations in education is missing in the current landscape. Such instrument could be a real game-changer, especially when it comes to supporting the European green and digital transitions. In this regard, we believe that Horizon Europe, and the future FPs, could accelerate synergies between R&I and teaching & learning through harnessing the full potential of the European Institute of Technology (EIT).

Selection criteria for Horizon Europe projects should also pay further attention to research knowledge transfer to educational institutions, settings, practices, and curricula, as this would increase the uptake of innovative R&I-led education. We also recommend that Horizon Europe rules better support the active engagement of students in funded projects' innovation and entrepreneurial activities whenever possible.

We urge the European Commission:

- To place more emphasis on the synergies between regional, national and EU strategic R&I programmes at policy and implementation levels in order to increase and maximise the impact of R&I investments available in Europe, which overall level remains largely insufficient.
- To further simplify and align the rules and procedures of ESIF and the FPs.
- To create a 'synergies' mapping with practical guides on how to best connect and combine the different actions and tools of the various programmes. This would maximise the overall impact of the R&I strategies.
- To put significant weight on research knowledge transfer to educational practices and curricula when evaluating research projects, especially in Pillars II and III
- To harness the full potential of the European Institute of Technology.
- To pilot a new bottom-up 'gateway' instrument between the Erasmus+ and the FPs (such as an ERC equivalent for teaching and learning in the form of an 'Excellent Frontier Education programme').

b) Improved accessibility and inclusiveness

Research Assessment Reform and the Framework Programmes

CG welcomes the ongoing reform of research Assessment as a very laudable and remarkable initiative. We also see the way research is assessed as a defining aspect of the FPs, hence this reform as a great opportunity to enhance their inclusiveness.

As an important example, academic age must be taken into account in research assessment, and there must not be an over-reliance on the track record of applicants compared to the excellence of a research proposal (see https://www.worldscientific.com/doi/abs/10.1142/S0219525918500145). We also see great potential in the better consideration of diversity and gender, which are of the greatest importance. At the same time, we want to emphasise that progress in these areas needs special vigilance when it comes to the implementation. To this end, we endorse clear advancements on addressing gender discrimination under Horizon Europe, but we advise that a deeper awareness of how the current assessment system impacts negatively on women's careers should be taken into consideration when designing the next FP.

Championing open collaboration is a welcomed aspect of the reform, but it must be clear that engagement with societal actors should remain optional, not mandatory, and that this should be requested/undertaken only when appropriate to the project, to avoid researchers engaging in irrelevant 'tick box' led approaches. Following recent efforts in driving collaboration with societal actors, there have been reports back from some NGOs, patient groups and indigenous groups informing that they are receiving numerous requests for collaboration and are often left feeling they are being 'used' for the sole sake of compliance with the rules. Reciprocity must be a core value in any such collaboration, and we must steer away from incentivizing poor practices in engagement with societal actors.

Disruptive changes such as the reform of research assessment can also be intimidating for researchers and institutions. To mitigate this, we advise for as much transparency as possible in the processes so that the stakeholders have clarity on how the implementation of the reform into the Programme

develops. This is also important for the universities to align their own research assessment systems with the FP10 rules.

We recommend:

- To gradually align with the Research Assessment reform and use this opportunity to enhance inclusiveness of the programme.
- To closely monitor the impact and effectiveness of changes.

Early career researchers

The Covid-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and its economic consequences have created a host of challenges for researchers in addition to those that already existed. While this has impacted research productivity for both experienced and early-stage scientists, the latter – women in particular – are further affected by career advancement concerns. As pointed out in the Coimbra Group report "Universities' response to the Covid-19 crisis: What have we learnt so far?" (December 2021), the crisis has only revealed how fragile the status of early-career researchers is.

Coimbra Group believes that the mobility of early career researchers is highly important to create scientific networks, develop research capacities and to achieve a culture of internationalisation. We also stress the need to end with the so-called 'permadoc' phenomenon and to increase investment in human capital to support all researchers, including doctoral candidates. **FP10 needs to be maintained and consolidated as an important facilitator for mobility and as an entry point to the EU R&I funding landscape for early career researchers.**

We hope that the implementation of ERA Action 4 on strengthening research careers will foster concrete changes for the improvement of early-careers researchers' working conditions and talent circulation, including through removing legal barriers and increasing financial support at national and EU levels.

We call for:

- Europe-wide monitoring of young researchers' situation.
- Implementing new mechanisms to support early career researchers such as ad hoc funding schemes.
- Better funding for MSCA in future FPs.

Association agreements

The absence of a clear timeline for finalising association agreements causes increasing concerns and endangers current and future plans for international scientific collaboration. The deadlocks in negotiations on the association agreements with the United Kingdom (UK) and Switzerland are of

extreme concern given the long-standing scientific ties with the European research community. , We also identify serious risks   for the cooperation with potential partners coming from countries such as Canada or Japan, whose association agreements are not yet totally finalised. The association processes should be as inclusive as possible and open to the widest range of third countries with strong research bases, with only limitation the requirement to comply with conditions to promote essential academic values, in particular academic freedom.

Especially the uncertainty around the association of the UK and Switzerland to Horizon Europe, now considered Third Countries, has resulted in delays at the Grant Agreement stage and in an extra administrative burden given that researchers coming from these two countries had to change their status (if co-ordinating), or withdraw from the projects. This has also created friction within existing consortia not sure whether to continue involving UK/Swiss partners in their bids or not. UK researchers remain eligible to apply for funding as beneficiaries and the UK government is currently guaranteeing funding for all UK participants' involvement (as third country participants) in successful Horizon Europe proposals whilst association is pending, but neither of these facts are widely understood across Europe, leading to UK researchers being unnecessarily excluded from projects. This situation is damaging to collegiality and health of scientific networks.

Europe's strategic autonomy requires close collaboration with the EU's closest partner in research and innovation. Decades of mutually beneficial collaboration in science are at risk. At any rate, the EU should avoid using association as a lever or means to achieve aims unrelated to science. It is a matter of own interest and expediency.

We urge the EC:

- To work towards a successful implementation of association agreements to Horizon Europe, before even launching the first Work Programmes of FP10 to safeguard this valuable and mutually beneficial international R&I cooperation.
- To review the association mechanisms to prevent the repetition of protracted processes in the future.
- To engage in dialogue with national research councils in order to exchange views about which association agreements they work with and which principles they have for their bilateral and multilateral association agreements.
- To provide applicants and their research support offices with clearer guidance on the participation of Third Countries.
- To do everything in its power to ensure swift association of UK and Switzerland to Horizon Europe.

SSH in the Future FPs

Interdisciplinary challenge-based research plays a crucial role in achieving the digital and green transitions, increasing European industrial competitiveness and tackling complex global challenges.

Investigating the human, cultural and societal dimensions of these transformations and challenges is key and, in this framework, SSH disciplines are increasingly active on interdisciplinary themes and offer fertile ground for inter and multi-disciplinary approaches.

CG maintains that the central role of SSH research needs to be fully acknowledged and empowered: FP10 should go beyond the concept of mere "SSH integration" (i.e. contribution from SSH disciplines to STEM-led projects) and should be designed so as to allow SSH academics to take the role of primary applicants across the entire programme.

In this perspective, it is also important to consider that the SSH label covers a wide variety of disciplines but their participation in the programme has been so far relatively uneven: taking into consideration the differences between the social sciences and the humanities is the first step for unlocking the full potential of SSH research. In particular, the involvement of the humanities and the arts in collaborative research should be fostered in order to maximize the scientific, economic and societal impacts stemming from different methodological and epistemological approaches.

We strongly recommend:

- To involve SSH researchers in the co-design of FP10 in order to increase the societal impact of future EU funded projects.
- To create a "Societal Readiness Level" (SRL, defined according to the Innovation Fund Denmark), which will serve as a way of assessing the level of societal adaptation readiness of, for instance, a particular social project, a technology, a product, a process, an intervention, or an innovation (whether social or technical).

c) More transparency in the design process and in strategic planning

Transparency. MS and ACs are responsible for appointing representatives in the different programme's committees. In this regard, when it comes to the development of the WPs, more transparency would be welcomed as the opportunities to participate in their design, for stakeholders such as universities, vary a lot depending on the country, or even on the representative appointed to each of the committees.

R&I stakeholders provide high-quality collective input from the different communities in the R&I system, all being necessary to achieve an effective and resilient ERA. Therefore, they should have the same opportunities to provide feedback during the design of the future calls through a co-creative approach. We consider that this is the only way to guarantee the full transparency of the FP and equal opportunities for all future applicants.

There should also be greater transparency concerning the names of actors that have access to the responses to EC public consultations, including position papers, the names of actors responsible for their analysis and how these contributions are effectively taken into account in the strategic planning process.

We encourage the EC:

- To provide universities with the right resources in order to empower them to participate in the design of FP10.
- To implement the same ERA Forum sectorial approach in the composition of the programme committees, including not only MS/AC representatives, but also European R&I stakeholders.
- To make all draft WPs openly and publicly available so that any interested stakeholder can consult them at any time.
- To not externalise the analysis of the input provided by stakeholders though the public R&I consultations as there is a risk that not all relevant points reach the EC.

d) Increased budget

Budget

Coimbra Group has noticed that R&I has been gradually included in many policy makers shortlists of political priorities in the last years. However, despite this positive move, when EU budget negotiations start, R&I is usually one of the first items to be cut-off endangering the implementation of all the Union's objectives such as climate change, shaping new solutions for healthcare, or the improvement of skills, inclusive growth and jobs, among others. This also happens at a MS level. The aim of increasing R&I investments to 3% of EU GDP, as well as the new 1.25% EU GDP public effort target to be achieved by MS by 2030, are not respected.

At the end of the negotiations on the current Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), the 95.5 € billion finally allocated are far from the 160 € billion requested by the research community. Furthermore, the position from the EU Council to reduce attributions to the EU FP yearly budget has become a constant practice. **The Coimbra Group is thus concerned about these substantial and disproportionate budget cuts, as it happened again in the 2023 Horizon Europe budget.**

Coimbra Group has also noticed a recurrent re-allocation of the existing FP budget to new Commission-led priorities outside the programme, such as the European Chips Act, the Health and Emergency Response Agency or the Hydrogen Valley initiative under the REPowerEU Plan. This reallocation of funds from Horizon Europe to other EU initiatives creates uncertainty for researchers and innovators and severely hits programmes such as the ERC and MSCA, which are already underfunded, putting at risk European researchers' careers and the capacity of the EU to formulate innovative responses to the global challenges. If the EU wants to emerge as a leader, we need a more ambitious budget for FP10, especially for Pillar I. Without science-based evidence we will not be able to address many of the pressing challenges the world is facing.

We strongly call for:

- An increase in the budget for Pillar I. It is important to continue protecting the independence of the ERC's Scientific Council as the main governing body of the ERC and its role in guiding the implementation of the programme's funding streams. Preserving MSCA is also of high relevance to ensure support to the most promising research talent in Europe and Europe as an attractive place where to conduct research.

- A greater transparency in the budget allocation and implementation processes, and in the information provided on how much of the Horizon Europe funds have been allocated and granted to non-Horizon Europe priorities in order to understand how much budget remains available for researchers' applications.
- Keeping putting pressure on MS' to commit sustainable funding for EU R&I, including target of public and private efforts, balance between competitive and non-competitive funding.
- Assessing whether an extension of the MFF (and the R&I FP) would ensure and signal long-term dedication to solving certain societal challenges and would provide impact over much longer time-periods.

The Coimbra Group

The Coimbra Group is a European university network, which, since 1985, has promoted higher education and research cooperation. The Coimbra Group consists of forty-one comprehensive, long-established research universities from across Europe. It comprises key institutions for promoting staff and student mobility and fostering international mobility of doctoral candidates and early-stage researchers. It brings together members from all European regions. It has, therefore, a particular awareness of regional differences and the varying impact of economic and financial instability on different higher education and research systems. The Coimbra Group members strongly emphasise the importance of fundamental research and see the SSH as equal and integral parts not only of their teaching and research portfolio, but also of their contribution to society and to economic development. Moreover, the Coimbra Group and its member universities have a long-standing tradition of global collaboration with institutions of research and higher education in other world regions.

http://www.coimbra-group.eu