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Ireland's Preliminary Position – Next EU Research and Innovation Framework Programme

March 2025



Introduction

The world in which the next EU research and innovation (R&I) framework programme will be developed is very different to the backdrop to previous framework programmes, as the challenges become ever more complex and the geopolitical context changes rapidly.

The EU has an opportunity to design an R&I framework programme that helps ensure a competitive, secure and prosperous Europe now and in the future. This requires putting R&I at the heart of EU policymaking and the development of the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF).

To reap the many benefits of R&I investment, Europe needs a dedicated and integrated programme. We must learn from the experience of Horizon Europe and ensure an adequate and ring-fenced budget focused on maintaining Europe's track record for producing excellent science while improving its performance in transforming that knowledge into cutting-edge goods, services, technologies and creative solutions that benefit society. The pursuit of European added value should inform the design and implementation of the next framework programme (FP10).

FP10 needs to be ambitious because the framework programmes set the tone for what happens in national systems – from driving excellence to promoting transnational cooperation and supporting open science and gender equality.

The EU needs to preserve and protect what works well while evolving and innovating to ensure the framework programme remains relevant and fit for purpose. FP10 will run until 2034.

While R&I can make a significant contribution to achieving wider policy priorities, not everything can or should be achieved through the framework programmes.

Greater attention should be paid to the alignment and coherence between national and EU programmes to maximise the combined impact of national and EU investment.

This preliminary position paper sets out Ireland's priorities for FP10:

- **Excellence** must remain the primary criterion for the award of framework programme funding to maintain Europe's track record for producing excellent research;
- **Innovation** of all types from incremental to disruptive innovation must be supported to drive Europe's competitiveness and ensure sustainable growth; and
- **Implementation tools** underpinning FP10 must be effective and fit for purpose to ensure that the framework programme continues to be transformative.

Excellence

The focus of European R&I policy must remain on producing excellent science. This is essential to optimise the contribution that R&I make to achieving wider EU priorities and to maintaining and enhancing Europe's global leadership position.

Supporting and promoting transnational cooperation should remain a cornerstone of FP10. International collaboration plays a significant role in driving research excellence and maximising the impact of R&I investment. However as R&I become increasingly geopolitical, it is vital to find the appropriate balance between safeguarding EU interests and values and continuing to collaborate with global partners. Maintaining an open approach to international R&I collaboration, while managing the risks, is particularly important for small open economies like Ireland.

Excellence must remain the primary criterion for the award of funding under FP10. Open competition between researchers, innovators and ideas, based on independent expert review, is the most effective mechanism to promote excellent research and drive innovation. The European Research Council (ERC)'s mandate to fund excellent, frontier research across all disciplines should be retained and enhanced and its independence protected. The Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions given their importance for researcher mobility and career development, should also be maintained and enhanced.

Europe needs to strike the appropriate balance between curiosity-driven research and a more directional and targeted approach to R&I investment in the next MFF.

Greater alignment between FP10 and the European Research Area (ERA) is essential to ensure the successful implementation of European R&I policy priorities. As the main instrument to implement agreed ERA priorities, the framework programme needs to contribute to achieving ERA objectives – not just through the current dedicated ERA work programme but across all pillars.

Accelerating the implementation of structural R&I reforms such as research assessment, research careers, open science and knowledge valorisation is critically important to improve national R&I systems and reduce the innovation gap within and between Member States.

A nuanced approach to widening is required in FP10 given the changing R&I landscape across Europe. It should be informed by an evaluation of the current performance of widening countries and instruments.

FP10 should build on the progress made on gender equality in previous programmes, particularly the Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) introduced under Horizon Europe. The focus for FP10 should be to incentivise the development of effective and impactful GEPs and promote gender mainstreaming.

Innovation

The EU has renewed its commitment to improving its innovation performance and has recognised this as part of the new European competitiveness deal. FP10 will have a key role to play in achieving that. However, ensuring coherence and minimising duplication within FP10 and across MFF programmes will be critically important to optimise public investment at EU and national levels and stimulate private investment.

Ireland recognises the need for a dedicated focus on disruptive innovation and technologies and ensuring a better financing environment for all companies to grow and scale up. However, this should not be at the expense of other forms of innovation.

The EU needs to continue to support all types of innovation, from incremental to breakthrough innovation. Maintaining a focus on SMEs in FP10 and the MFF more broadly is crucial for employment and economic growth in Europe.

The establishment of the European Innovation Council (EIC) under Horizon Europe has been a positive development and needs to be continued and further developed in FP10. The interim review of Horizon Europe will provide an opportunity to assess the EIC's effectiveness to date and inform how the new instruments that underpin the EIC can be improved.

Providing the necessary flexibility and agility to respond to the changing needs of the innovator is vital to ensure that European businesses are the most competitive in the world, producing

disruptive technologies and creating new markets.

The new innovation instruments under Horizon Europe have resulted in an increasingly complex innovation landscape at European level and increasing areas of overlap. The EU needs to ensure that the combination of innovation instruments in FP10 and the wider MFF is fit for purpose and delivers European added value. Hard choices will need to be made about what to prioritise in the new framework programme to achieve Europe's objectives and priorities. Ireland questions the rationale for continuing the European Institute of Innovation & Technology (EIT) in its current format given the importance of its stated mission.

There needs to be a greater focus on how FP10 can more effectively support knowledge valorisation and ensure the right enabling environment to boost knowledge transfer and leverage Europe's investment in research and knowledge to develop world-class products and creative solutions to benefit society. Ensuring the appropriate balance between research and innovation in FP10 will be critical to ensure a steady pipeline of research results to underpin European innovation activities.

Ireland recognises the increasing opportunities for cross-fertilisation of civilian and defence research activities and the potential benefits for Europe's competitiveness and security. However, Ireland favours retaining the civilian focus of the R&I framework programmes.

Implementation tools

Ensuring the implementation tools in place to execute the agreed framework programme are fit for purpose will be essential to maximise FP10's impact.

In particular, FP10 needs to be simplified to make it more appealing and more accessible to applicants. As the framework programme has become increasingly complex over the years, it is more challenging for applicants to navigate. The administrative burden for applicants has also increased significantly. To effectively simplify the operation of FP10, the focus should be on how best to meet the needs of the applicant and attract new entrants to the programme.

The number of instruments should be streamlined. Several new instruments were introduced under Horizon Europe with varying degrees of success. Ireland cautions against introducing new instruments in FP10 unless there is a compelling reason to do so. The EU must also be prepared to sunset initiatives that are no longer the most effective way of achieving Europe's R&I objectives.

The EU needs to reform the co-creation and co-implementation procedures for FP10 to ensure Member States are centrally involved from an early stage, particularly on strategic planning, work programme development and on how to respond to new issues that emerge over the lifetime of the programme.

Ireland supports the continuation of the 'three-pillar approach' and highlights areas where there is scope to improve the structure of FP10:

- *Infrastructure:* As a critical element of an enabling R&I environment, infrastructure is a horizontal issue and should be treated as such in FP10. A coherent and holistic approach to all types of infrastructure for R&I – including research and technology infrastructure – is required to effectively support the evolving needs of R&I stakeholders;
- *Partnerships:* In spite of the commitment to overhaul the approach to partnerships and substantially rationalise the number of partnerships, the execution has fallen well short of the ambition. The EU needs to redouble its efforts in FP10 to streamline the R&I partnership landscape, informed by lessons from Horizon Europe on openness, transparency and the role of Member States;
- *Missions:* Implementing this new instrument has been very challenging with mixed results to date. The R&I dimension is but a small part of what is required to achieve the very ambitious aims of the five missions. An MFF wide approach accompanied by appropriate governance structures is required to successfully implement the missions; and
- *Interlinkages between pillars:* A greater focus on the interlinkages between pillars is required to improve Europe's innovation performance and optimise the impact of R&I investment on increasingly multifaceted global challenges. The portfolio approach could play a role

but a more transparent understanding of how it is currently implemented in Horizon Europe will be required to inform how it could be used effectively in FP10.

A number of other cross-cutting issues should also be addressed:

- smaller projects so that applicants of all sizes have an opportunity to participate in FP10 calls;
- curiosity-led, bottom-up calls to complement the top-down, outcome focused ones and encourage creative solutions to current and future challenges;
- continuing to foster and incentivise transdisciplinary and multidisciplinary cooperation, including between STEM and social sciences and humanities.

An integrated approach to the design as well as the implementation of the next set of EU programmes is required to maximise the impact of EU investment in R&I. Synergies between Union programmes and national initiatives also need to be facilitated.

The horizontal requirements in the framework programmes – such as open science, research integrity and gender equality – are a valuable tool to effect change and achieve R&I objectives at European and national level. As with R&I instruments, continuing to add new requirements without rationalising existing ones will limit the effectiveness of FP10 to implement policy priorities while increasing the administrative burden for applicants. FP10 provides an opportunity to revisit the horizontal requirements and ensure they are fit for purpose.

Conclusion

Ireland strongly believes that the EU needs to maintain its world-renowned R&I flagship programme. Building on its strengths and achievements is essential if Europe is serious about acting now to maximise the contribution of R&I to overall competitiveness as well as providing a vital source of solutions to a range of societal challenges.

