

What is the vision for Widening Participation and Spreading Excellence in FP10?

We want to thank all the members of The Guild's Widening Participation working group and Vice-Presidents.

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May 2026

Online version: https://www.the-guild.eu/publications/position-papers/the-guild_widening-participation-position-paper_may2026.pdf

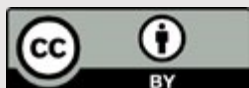
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.48620/97771>

To cite this work please use the following reference:

The Guild, (2026). What is the vision for Widening Participation and Spreading Excellence in FP10? The Guild of European Research-Intensive Universities and Bern Open Publishing. DOI: 10.48620/97771

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What is the vision for Widening Participation and Spreading Excellence in FP10?

Introduction

Leading up to the next Framework Programme for R&I (FP10), The Guild member universities welcome the progress made by widening Member States in recent years: the participation of Widening countries in Horizon Europe has increased and average success rates of applications from Widening and non-Widening Member States are converging. Still, underperformance of Widening countries remains striking in key parts of the programme, notably the European Research Council (ERC) and European Innovation Council (EIC).¹ In this context, we welcome the Commission's continued commitment to strengthen R&I capacity across Europe and the allocation of 3,3% of the proposed FP10 budget to widening measures.

We emphasise the importance for all Member States, including Widening countries, to invest 3% of GDP in research and innovation. This commitment is even more important today, as the security, competitiveness and welfare of Europe are at stake. We also reiterate our call to rename the 'Widening Participation and Spreading Excellence' part of the programme so that it better reflects the purpose of collaborating and empowering institutions and researchers in Widening countries. This would also enhance a sense of mutual ownership of research and innovation, a goal that is undermined by a notion that excellence should be spread in a single direction from one part of Europe to another, without any returns flowing the other way.

The current Commission's proposal acknowledges that a group of countries has made significant progress in terms of overall performance of their R&I systems and participation in Horizon Europe and should therefore be moved to the so-called Transition countries.² According to the proposal, they would no longer have access to capacity-building measures such as ERA Chairs and Teaming. Although we welcome the distinction between Widening and Transition countries, the proposal does not

1 - The European Commission's midterm review of Horizon Europe showed that the average success rates of applications from Widening and non-Widening Member States are converging (18,6% vs 19,6%), with eight of the Widening Member States being above the average. The programme parts that show the strongest difference in average success rates is the ERC (6,8% vs 15,0%), followed by the EIC (7,9% vs 14,2%). European Commission. (2025). *Interim Evaluation of the Horizon Europe Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (2021 - 2024)*. Retrieved May 19, 2026, from <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52025PC0551>

2 - Cyprus, Estonia, Greece, Malta, Portugal and Slovenia.

offer a phase-out vision for Transition countries. Also, the proposal does not mention areas of intervention – specific widening instruments that are meant to close the R&I gap – leaving it up to the work programme phase to decide on specific measures.

We notice that the most striking R&I gap is not between Widening and non-Widening countries, but within the widening group itself. The bottom six to eight countries which continuously rank lowest in the European Innovation Scoreboard still depend on widening capacity-building instruments. At the same time, both Transition and Widening countries would benefit from measures that focus on building research excellence.

Discussion on widening should not be seen as a threat to excellence, but as an opportunity for policymakers and experts to design effective measures which ultimately help lower R&I performing countries to move out of the widening category. It should also be noted that all Member States participate in the widening component of the programme through funding as an advanced partner.

Researchers from Widening countries wish to compete with the best researchers worldwide, so instead of creating isolated calls throughout FP10 aimed at Widening countries, we should focus on increasing their overall participation in FP10. Any mainstreaming of Widening Participation should be done carefully: a successful example in Horizon Europe are ERA Fellowships which have attracted more Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) postdoctoral researchers to Widening countries.³

Finally, designing FP10 should not simply consider the progress made in recent years, but also the impact of the new funding architecture proposed in the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). It will be critical to encourage R&I spending through the National and Regional Partnership Plans envisaged by the European Commission, not least in Widening countries. Moreover, it is important to consider how the connections between the new European Competitiveness Fund (ECF) and the collaborative projects under Pillar II of FP10 might impact the R&I gap. The ECF should promote the best ideas for scale-up and market-readiness irrespective of geography. At the same time, higher technology readiness levels and complexity of the calls could disadvantage universities, especially universities without the resources and experience to participate in such calls.

Building on our [position paper on FP10](#) (May 2024) and [joint FP10 amendments](#) (December 2025), The Guild shares the following recommendations for Widening Participation, including European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST) Actions:

3 - European Commission. (2025). *Interim Evaluation of the Horizon Europe Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (2021 - 2024)*. Retrieved May 19, 2026, from <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52025PC0551>

Make explicit FP10's commitment to Widening Participation

FP10 should translate its commitment to Widening Participation by adopting the following articles from the current Horizon Europe programme (FP9):

- Geographical balance should be considered, as appropriate, in evaluation panels, boards and expert groups, depending on the available expertise in each R&I field.
- Geographical diversity should continue to be used as one of the evaluation criteria for dealing with ex-aequo proposals.
- The Commission should monitor and report on indicators such as the participation of Widening countries, the geographical composition of consortia in collaborative projects, the use of a two-stage submission and evaluation procedure, measures aimed at facilitating collaborative links within Europe. This data needs to be sufficiently granular to provide meaningful evidence on widening performance against objectives, noting that the performance of researchers varies across the programme.⁴
- The share of the widening budget within FP10 should be maintained at 3.3% throughout the programme, responding to the widening objectives.

Conditionality to access widening funding should be clarified

The Commission's proposal includes a conditionality clause, stating that from 2030 access to capacity-building measures is restricted to those Widening countries that have increased their real expenditure of public investment in research and development in the latest known year compared to the year prior to it.

Although increasing national spending on R&I is crucial, the proposed conditionality clause must consider the following:

- It would negatively affect researchers in countries with lower R&I capacity, based on criteria unrelated to the quality of their project proposals.
- For a temporary period, due to external circumstances, a country may only be able to increase R&I investment nominally. Therefore, we propose to refer to nominal rather than real expenditure.
- The conditionality clause would not act as an incentive for those countries which do not prioritise participation in widening instruments.

4 - In Estonia's case, as much as a quarter of the funding comes from Widening Participation actions, which account for only 3% of the Framework Programme budget. By contrast, the actions of the European Research Council (ERC) and the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions, which account for about a quarter of the Framework Programme budget, provide only 10% of Estonia's funding. Estonian Research Council. Teadusagentuur, E. (2025). Estonian Research 2025. In DSpace repository (University of Tartu). <https://doi.org/10.58009/tead/010>

Improve the indicators to determine Widening/Transition countries

The European Innovation Scoreboard (EIS) is not the most appropriate measure to assess whether a country should be considered a 'Widening' or 'Transition' country. The analysis should focus on EIS indicators that are directly relevant to country's R&I capacity and its participation in the programme. The [European Court of Auditors special report](#) showed that in selecting Widening countries in Horizon Europe, the Commission has not included a country's participation in previous Horizon Europe programmes and its position in transnational and multidisciplinary research networks.

Before deciding on the widening category, we should define what level of participation we consider sufficient, noting that it is in the nature of an excellence-based programme that some countries will do better than others. What level of underperformance, then, is unacceptable – and what level of granularity should we apply across the programme, given significant differences in performance between different pillars?

Introduce a phase-out plan for Transition countries

The programme should offer a clear perspective for Transition countries. Their progress should be rewarded with targeted measures and monitored to phase out their participation as a 'Widening' country, while continuing collaboration opportunities with Widening countries. To achieve this dual goal, the following measures could be designed:

- Measures that increase the Transition countries' access and participation rate in other parts of the programme and raise the level of research collaboration in existing pan-European R&I networks.
- Dedicated measures that use the experience of transition countries in improving their R&I performance to support Widening countries. For example, some universities have recorded remarkable success in ERC competitions over the past years, with up to five ERC grants per year.⁵ They should be incentivised to share what has enabled this transformation with institutions in Widening countries.
- Transition countries should be encouraged to take up advanced partner roles in widening capacity-building instruments, while continuing collaboration with both Widening and Transition countries in other widening instruments.

Invest in instruments with proven added value

Widening instruments have not worked uniformly well, and some measures have been introduced only recently. The Guild strongly supports investment

5 - ERC highlights actions to close Europe's research performance gap: Widening Excellence: Bridging the ERC gap for a truly pan-European research area, ERC Scientific Council White Paper. (2026, April 29). ERC. <https://erc.europa.eu/news-events/news/erc-highlights-actions-close-europes-research-performance-gap>

in instruments that have proven their added value – Teaming, Twinning, ERA Fellowships. The added value includes increase in R&I capacity and international reputation, attracting competitive research funding from other sources, and addressing brain drain. The widening pillar needs a good balance between system-level initiatives (Teaming, Excellence Hubs) and instruments aimed at individual and institutional levels (Twinning, ERA Chairs, ERA Fellowships). Both should benefit from increased opportunities for research collaboration, which is currently limited to, for instance, 30% in Twinning, 20% in European Excellence Initiative, and 10% in Teaming. Enhancing the research dimension of widening instruments would increase their attractiveness and could ultimately lead to increasing the capacity of widening institutions to compete in ERC, EIC and collaborative calls across the programme.

Mainstream examples of synergies with other funding instruments

Any vision for closing the R&I gap must include a focus on how R&I can be better supported by European and national actors, and how these instruments complement each other. Synergies at the level of policy and programming must be a priority for FP10. The benefits and practical implementation rules for synergies, such as the Seal of Excellence and transfer of funds under the new National and Regional Plans, should be clearly communicated with best practices shared among Member States. For example, only a few countries have used the possibility of transferring resources from cohesion policy funds to Horizon Europe to support positively evaluated projects. Rising demand for Horizon Europe funding makes it even more important to make the most comprehensive use of the high-quality evaluation process.

The ERA Structural policy dedicated to “Access to Excellence”, which brings together the authorities managing Cohesion Policy and national R&I bodies, needs to be strengthened and the group’s [Report on European Synergies of Funds](#) followed up on.

Award the MSCA label to ERA Fellowships

Since ERA Fellowships are subject to the same evaluation criteria as MSCA Postdoctoral fellowships, it is important that they receive the same MSCA label. The label would help raise the visibility of the scheme in the research community and the prestige of the scheme, especially for early-career researchers. Also, to avoid ERA fellows being hosted by only a few Widening countries, the rules for dealing with ex-aequo applications should be applied, to enable more Widening countries to benefit from the scheme.

Use widening budget to support excellent proposals under ERC and EIC

Following the successful model of ERA Fellowships under MSCA, the widening budget could support additional high-quality proposals under ERC and EIC. This

would not jeopardize the excellence principle nor their bottom-up nature but offer more research and innovation opportunities for researchers and companies wishing to carry out their projects in Widening countries.

Another measure to increase the R&I performance of Widening countries is a Proof-of-Concept (PoC) scheme to enable both transition and Widening countries to use the results of the research being developed in widening projects. Widening PoC could be open to widening-led projects across the programme, assuming that Pillar III keeps the EIC Pre-Accelerator which is a more advanced scheme compared to the proposed Proof-of Concept. The role model for this scheme could be the ERC PoC, where grantees who are finalising their ERC grant can apply for a small top-up grant to explore market possibilities for their research and prepare for other calls like the EIC.

Strengthen COST to the benefit of researchers and improve funding rules

COST serves as a unique instrument by fostering bottom-up networking across the research community. It should be an accessible tool for collaboration, knowledge exchange, and innovation, especially for early-career researchers in large-scale consortia. However, its popularity has recently been reflected in lower success rates which should be addressed through specific measures and by increasing the number of actions funded per year to the benefit of researchers.

To ease the management of COST Actions, the overhead budget for grant coordinators should be increased to at least 25%. Coordinators carry considerable administrative workloads without adequate funding for project management support. Higher overheads would enable universities to recruit professional support staff and strengthen the networking, training, and stakeholder engagement activities within a COST Action. Finally, it is important to align reimbursement measures with Horizon Europe rules and cover Value Added Tax (VAT) costs in the eligible reimbursements. The inconsistent VAT rates across COST countries (ranging from 8.1% to 27%) can lead to additional administrative complications as organisations must navigate varying national rules and depend on other instruments to cover the VAT rates.

Align appointment rules and introduce evaluation for COST Management Committee members

COST should align appointment rules for the Management Committee (MC) members across COST countries, based on existing best practices. In their role, the nominees act as a link to the domestic research community and promote national participation in the COST Action. Current disparities in national appointment rules to designate MC members create the risk of token participation and uneven involvement. They should also be subject to clear evaluation criteria to prevent

superficial engagement. Such evaluations could consider attendance, active participation and scientific contribution. Having a specific role in the COST Action should be compulsory for MC members. As they play an essential role as representatives of the academic community in their country and hold important administrative responsibilities, including the approval of the annual budget, the proposed measures (appointment rules and evaluation criteria) must be clearly defined and transparent.

Boost talent interaction through COST with researchers worldwide

The added value of COST Actions is their openness to collaboration with researchers from countries beyond formal association to Horizon Europe. COST should maintain its independent governance since it fosters global cooperation, including researchers from strategic and long-standing partners that are deeply engaged in the European Research Area (i.e. the UK and Switzerland).

According to COST data, participation by the international community in COST activities has doubled since 2022, but the current model does not allow funding for networks beyond the EU neighbourhood, the so-called Near Neighbour Countries. The Global Europe Instrument could make a significant difference by bringing in the research community from low- and middle-income countries to reimburse the participation of their researchers in COST Actions. This opportunity for talent interaction would further advance the inclusiveness mission of COST. Moreover, given that in recent years Horizon Europe has become distinguished through global partnerships, including through the Africa Initiative, expanding the global scope of COST would correspond to a new global strategic mission of Horizon Europe.

